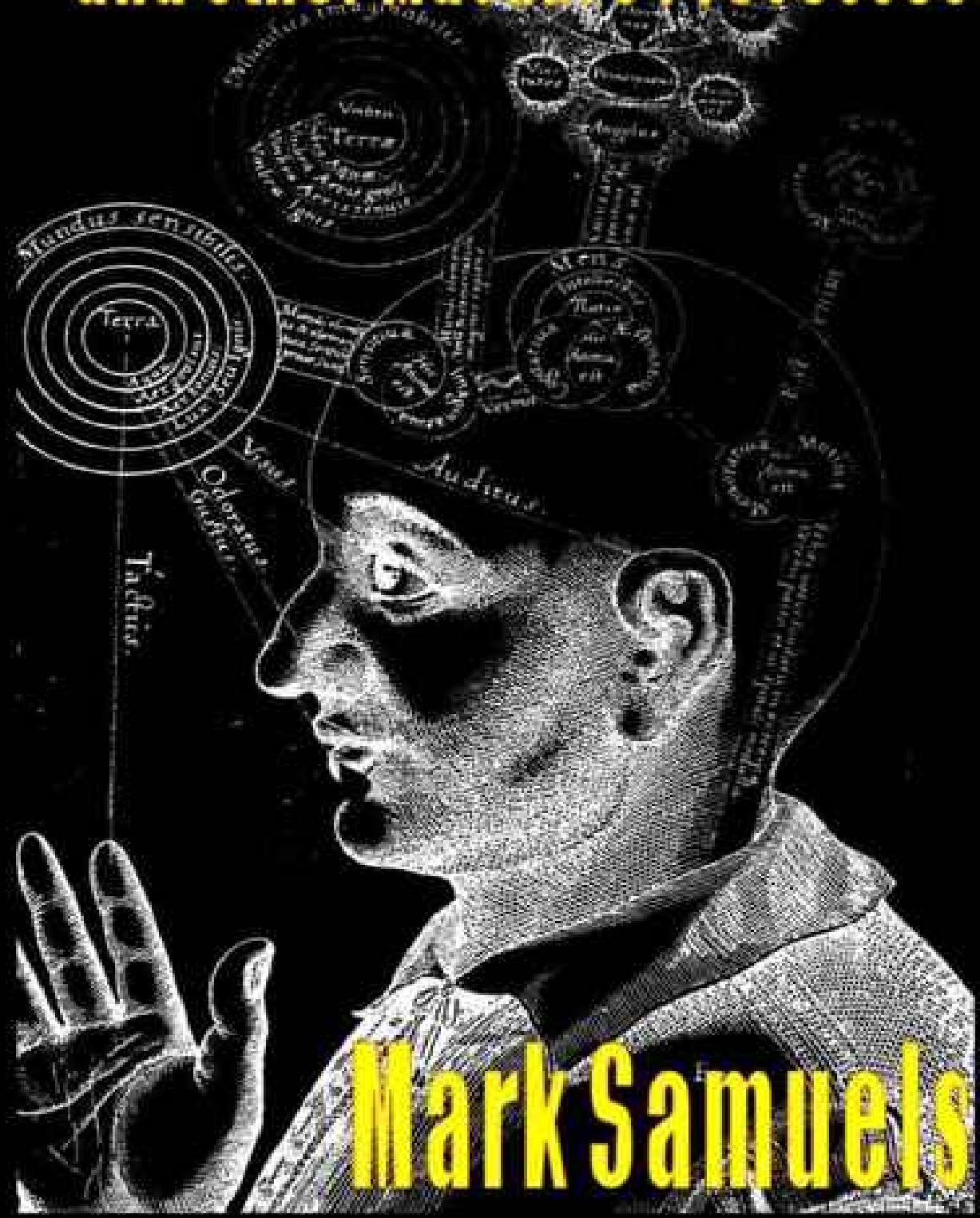
# Glyphotech

## and Other Macabre Processes




Mark Samuels

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# PREFACE

At the launch of the hardback edition of this book, in 2008 at a writers convention in Nottingham, I began to realise – or rather had it bluntly confirmed by others – that I did not seem to entirely understand the point of writing fiction. My attitude didn't quite 'fit' an author from whom 'great commercial things' were expected in the Weird/Horror/Fantasy writing community. In short, I was at odds with its ethos.

And, I am sorry to say, matters have got even worse since then. Owners of the first edition will note that I have dropped one tale from this reprint issue. This is because the satire therein is – after less than a decade – hopelessly inadequate; it having been wholly overtaken by even more outlandish developments.
Nevertheless, I still maintain weird literature is what it always has been: a vocation. Many are called, few are chosen.
In answer to the question 'why, then, are you self-publishing this book as a reissue?', I can enter only two pleas in my defence – and the first is sheer poverty. I cannot help noticing that all of my publishers are vastly financially better off than me. Doubtless it has ever been thus, in general, when it comes to the relationship between writers and publishers.

But it is also true that my motives are not wholly venal – and here we arrive at the second reason; that there has been a wave of demands from readers of my other books for this one's reappearance.

Mark Samuels,

London 2016.

# GLYPHOTECH

FRANKLYN CRISK DID not mind the job or even his colleagues in the office too much. Certainly, both bored him. No, it was the noise and the heat that were becoming intolerable. Outside the Mare Publishing House building, on the crossroads, some men in boiler suits were working on the road. Though the noise they made was more like fingernails clawing across a blackboard rather than like the juddering of a pneumatic drill, which is what one normally would expect to hear. It was the middle of summer but the office workers were forced to close all the windows in order to stifle the sound. Since the company did not regard the comfort of its employees as its concern, there was no air-conditioning and the temperature inside the cramped offices was unbearable. The clean shirt he'd donned this morning was soaked with sweat and his head throbbed painfully.

He wondered how he'd wound up being employed in this company, housed in a whitewashed four-storey structure on the corner of Fytton Square. It was obvious to him now that he had spent too long overseas. Twenty years in Kyoto, Japan, had rendered him almost unemployable back in his home country. He had (without being particularly aware of it) picked up the Japanese obsession with ritual and social custom to the degree that even his speech patterns betrayed a clipped formality that set him apart.

This job at the Mare firm was the only vacancy that had been offered to him, despite several other fruitless positions he'd applied for and which he felt he was more qualified. His work was drudgery; inputting book royalties onto a computer system, printing them out and then mailing the statements to authors. It meant eight hours staring at a dim monitor screen. The computers utilised by the firm for the tasks were almost obsolete. Their lack of modernity meant that there was no spare memory capacity for any other programs that might serve as a welcome distraction. There was no access to the Internet, or even an email facility to connect him with the world outside.

And now this ceaseless noise and heat! The worst of it was that the labourers always worked behind a tall screen that they'd erected and no one could see just what it was they were up to. The junction looked like a patchwork quilt, with different shades of grey indicating the age of the tarmac that had been overlaid there.

The men were only glimpsed when they emerged from behind their screens, walking to or from their dirty green van. Strangely, one never seemed to see them carrying shovels or pickaxes. Invariably clad in their nondescript black boiler suits, despite the heat, the operatives were not of the type that one would willingly approach directly in order to ask their business. They had none of the raucous bonhomie common to labourers, but were silent, unsmiling individuals with pale white faces, mouths like a slash and eyes like huge inkblots. Their abnormally long hands and fingernails were caked with dirt and one of Crisk's office colleagues joked that perhaps they dug with their bare hands.

The name on the side of the vehicle read "Glyphotech Reconstruction Co.". But when one of the Mare Staff dialled the telephone number that was also blazoned across the side of the van, he said he obtained a connection that rang without ever being answered. After a few days, however, the screens were taken away and merciful quiet reigned again. Strangely enough this happened to coincide with the onset of thunderstorms after the intense heat. A double relief, since as well as the irritating noise being gone, the temperature dropped.

Ж

"Sir," said Crisk in that clipped Japanese manner that he could not shake off since his return to the West, "please be good enough to explain. You say that I should go. But why you have not made clear. Respectfully I ask, of course."

"I am just," James O'Hara responded, wincing as he listened to Crisk's strangled English, "making a suggestion that may improve your quality of life. I've been watching you for a while and it seems to me that you're down in the dumps a lot of the time. What Glyphotech can provide is a

focus in your life: a way of realising possibilities that you yourself might not have thought of."

Crisk stared at O'Hara for a brief moment, considering what response he should give. His superior merely stood there smiling with his hands folded behind his back. Crisk remembered the name "Glyphotech": it had been written on the side of the van of the workers who'd been digging up the crossroads weeks before. But he could not fathom just what they had to do with this other venture. As if picking up on his thoughts, O'Hara interjected.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Glyphotech is a diverse company. As well as undertaking the reconstruction of buildings and roads, their course of psychological transformation is one of the other aspects of their enterprise. I really would recommend that you take the course, Crisk. Bear in mind that several of your colleagues have already signed up and not to do so might appear, well … "

He had to say no more in order to convince Crisk. Here was his office superior telling him that it was best to conform. The idea of falling out of favour was not pleasant to Crisk. He needed the job, even though he was bored by it. He had a duty, after all, to Mare Publishing Company.

"Sir," he replied, stifling the slight bow he wanted to make by force of habit. "Of course, I agree. Further discussion not necessary. Let me know time and meeting place. Gladly I will take part."

When Crisk got back to his desk after the meeting with O'Hara, he discreetly asked his office colleagues whether they too had been asked to attend the course run by Glyphotech. All had been requested to do so, some, they said, with the clear implication that not to accept O'Hara's suggestion would be severely frowned upon. From what Crisk could gather most of his co-workers viewed it as some kind of motivational seminar that would improve efficiency in the workplace and raise staff morale.

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Later that same day one of the office juniors came around the various departments to hand out flyers. The heading bore the logo of “Glyphotech Reconstruction Co.”, with the same design that Crisk had seen blazoned across the side of the workmen’s van. In bold capitals, underneath the logo, were the words:

“ *Do not underestimate the effect our process can have on YOUR life!*”
In smaller characters beneath this was the following short text:

“ *Do you feel drained, hopeless or adrift? At the mercy of what life throws at you instead of in control of events? We guarantee to provide empowerment and a sense of purpose you might never think you could achieve! Using our proven mental technology you will overcome all obstacles without fear, you will enjoy a renewed sense of purpose and success in both your private life and in your workplace environment. Attend our introductory seminar in the spirit of openness and friendship. Your life is too urgent to waste! Join us!*”

The flyer provided details of where and when the seminar was to be held; at the Grantham Hall Hotel, only a few minutes walk from the Mare Publishing House’s offices. When Crisk saw the hours involved, however, his spirits sank. It was a two-day affair, lasting from ten in the morning until ten at night and repeated the next day. Moreover, it was to take place this coming weekend.

There were stifled groans around the office as each individual got to this part of the text and realised they’d been duped into giving up not company time but their own personal time, and on an ostensibly voluntary basis.

In the days leading up to the weekend a dull sense of resentment permeated the offices of the Mare Publishing House. Though nothing was actually said aloud. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that the only one of those duped who had been brave enough to confront O’Hara about the deception was instantly dismissed from his job. The person, called David Hogg, found his desk cleared within five minutes of his speaking to O’Hara. He was forcibly escorted off the premises by the security guards moments before his personal belongings were flung out onto the street after him.

Crisk had been standing beside the doorway from which Hogg was ejected. The company had a strict no-smoking policy and Crisk would, at a quarter past every hour, enjoy a crafty cigarette at that spot. After helping the bewildered ex-employee collect together the various odds and ends not connected with work now strewn around him, they had a brief conversation.

“I am sorry…” said Crisk, “but if it is okay for me to ask, why did Mare Publishing so harshly treat with you?”
Hogg groaned.
“I know all about those Glyphotech seminars,” he finally replied. “I told O’Hara there was no way I’d go along with it, I’d warn the others to stay away. We had a hell of a row and he told me to get out. I could tell you things about Glyphotech that … ”
Crisk trembled inwardly at Hogg’s audacity. To upset O’Hara was to challenge the Mare Publishing Co. itself. He looked around him, horrified at the prospect of being seen even talking with the exemployee. To give up one weekend in order to curry favour was something Crisk was more than prepared to do. Backing away from Hogg, as if the man were contaminated, Crisk made his apologies, mumbled a word or two of consolation and scurried back inside the building. Crisk knew that O’Hara would find it easy to justify Hogg’s immediate dismissal, for he had only very recently been hired by the company and was often drunk at his workstation.
When Crisk was back and seated at his desk, he again looked over the Glyphotech flyer that had been handed out to everyone. Surely it was a wild over-reaction to make so much of a fuss over what seemed to be nothing more than a motivational seminar.

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At 10am sharp (O’Hara had warned everybody that being late for the seminar would not be looked upon kindly) on Saturday morning Crisk was seated amongst about a hundred other people in a ballroom within the Grantham Hall Hotel. There were the usual murmurings and muted conversations one would expect amongst a crowd of that size. As he looked around he spotted a number of his work colleagues and nodded at them in

recognition. Seated right at the front, he noticed, was O'Hara.
At the end of the room was a stage, a raised dais and behind it a screen on which slides could be projected.
Someone at the front of the room made a signal to a person at the back and the heavy panelled doors opened to admit a figure. The man, immaculately dressed in an expensive tailored suit, walked confidently down the aisle between the rows of seats towards the dais. His bearing was impressive; he seemed to exude an aura of unshakable confidence. And yet, at least to Crisk, there was also something of the arrogant mixed in with it.
The man mounted the platform behind the dais and smiled dazzlingly. He was in his mid-forties and his well-groomed black hair was swept back high over his forehead.
"Welcome to all you strangers, soon to be friends!" he said in a voice that rang out across the hall with clarity and purpose. Here was a man well used to public speaking.
"I want," he continued, "to congratulate each and everyone of you for deciding to come along to the seminar. You've made a decision that I know none of you will ever have cause to regret. Let me introduce myself. I'm Hastane Yubon. Now I know … "
Again he flashed that dazzling smile, looking around the room with a mock-comical expression.
" ... that some of you may be wondering just what you've signed up for. I want to say one thing right now. You're free to leave. Really. But if you do you're going to miss out on the rest of your life. What will happen to you over the next few days is that you'll experience a personal revolution."
Someone in a row towards the back tittered. Crisk looked over his shoulder and saw that it was a very overweight woman in her early thirties, wearing glasses and dressed all in black.
"Hey, that lady out there is only expressing what a lot of you are thinking. I mean, come on, these things are simply a moneymaking exercise, right? Wrong, my friends. If you take what we can offer, I mean, if you're really *open* to it: believe me, things will never be the same for you again."
He paused.
"Anybody want to leave?"
Yubon was staring and smiling at the overweight lady. She lowered her head, and looked a little sheepish.
"NO?"

There was a ripple of tension in the ballroom. At that moment, thought Crisk, it would have taken someone with a degree of selfassurance equal to Yubon's to have stood up and walked out. And no one did so.
Crisk was suddenly very uncomfortable. This wasn't like any motivational seminar he'd been to before. And he'd been forced to attend a number whilst employed by agencies over in Japan. This was something quite different. For perhaps the first time, he began to wonder whether his sense of company loyalty was not misplaced.
Yubon grinned.
"Well this is unusual, let me tell you. You're obviously a lot more intelligent than the last crowd of seminar attendees we had. But then they came from the south of the city … "
A number of people in the audience laughed and the tension dissipated.

ЖК

What Crisk realised after a couple of hours was that a significant number of persons attending the seminar had actually done the course previously. They were there to guide the newcomers and instruct them in the correct protocols that Glyphotech wished them to follow. For example, asking questions without permission was just not done. Daydreaming was not allowed. And in what few breaks there were, for meals or coffee, newcomers were encouraged only to mingle with those who were there for their guidance. Talk centred around discussions and explanations of Glyphotech's "technology" and a series of terms such as "eureka moments" and "routines" were frequently employed. The first referred to, apparently, a juncture in one's life where the possibility of happiness was within grasp. Whilst the second referred to an individual's habits; the displacement activities he would use to justify avoiding doing something he knew he had to do.
There were many more such terms, but Crisk lost interest in hearing about them. It seemed to him that this was simply some junk mixture of psychology, counselling, with elements of Zen-Buddhism tagged on to give it an ethereal sheen.
What came next turned his stomach. Back in the ballroom persons were

encouraged to come up to the microphone on the dais and expose their weaknesses, traumas and failings before the rest of the attendees. By the time the tenth had gone up (she seemed to be well versed in this form of communal confession) Crisk actually suspected that many welcomed the opportunity to bare their souls again in public. He wondered whether they had not become addicted to the experience. For what it brought in its wake, after the tears and sobbing, was a round of thunderous clapping from the audience. The first one or two confessions had been greeted with hesitant applause, but once things really got going tears dribbled down the cheeks of most participants. Such was the wave of warmth and mass acceptance generated it was with great difficulty that Crisk restrained himself from joining in with the process, and advancing up to the dais himself.

He could not help noticing throughout this part of the seminar that O'Hara kept glancing back at him from the front of the hall. Crisk was the only one of the Mare Publishing employees who had not yet succumbed to the hysterical atmosphere in the room.

Yubon returned to make periodic appearances on the stage, one of which was to explain the concept of "monologues" Glyphotech had developed. "Monologues," Yubon said cheerfully, his teeth flashing with that fake smile, "are the way we come to interpret what's happening to us, and of dealing with things that make us uncomfortable. Now let's take an example. Say your boss shouts at you because you're late for work. What's your reaction? You're angry, you're annoyed, YOU MAKE EXCUSES TO YOURSELF! And then you convince yourself he's a bad person, just because he's made you upset. You're using your monologue to avoid dealing with the real issue. Now here's the deal: don't get upset. He's not the problem. YOU'RE THE PROBLEM. Yes, get that and get it good. You see what I mean now? A monologue is when someone is talking to himself and not listening to someone else because he's angry or afraid. Aren't some of you doing that right now – EVEN WHEN I'M TALKING?"

Crisk squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. All the people around him were now nodding enthusiastically as if light bulbs had been turned on inside their minds. They were hanging on Yubon's every word. A horrible kind of blind faith and exultation spread palpably throughout the ballroom.

After Yubon stopped speaking he invited people to share their own examples of "monologues" with the rest of the group. There was almost a stampede to the dais, and a queue had to be formed.

One after the other people poured out their stories of how they'd neglected their mothers, their children, even their work, because they'd shifted the blame unreasonably instead of taking responsibility themselves. Yet what was worrying, at least to Crisk, was that he felt that some of these people had, by any reasonable and objective standard, been right in feeling resentment. One person told how he came to detest his dying mother who had been bedridden for four years. He'd cleaned up after her, fed her and the only thanks he'd got was to be told that she hated him and wanted to see her daughter who could not bear to see her in that state. Why shouldn't this person have had the right to resent such ingratitude? It was clear that he loved his mother, but to deny him access to a quite natural response, where was the logic in that? Another person told of being raped and was encouraged to forgive her attacker, to declare that she bore some complicity in his attack. And this plainly was not the case except through an almost deranged reading of the facts.

Rather than the light that had illuminated all those other minds in the hall, a cool and comforting darkness, like shade in the summer sun, entered Crisk's own mind.

I don't want my pain blanked out, he thought to himself; I need to keep my pain. It is a part of who I am, every bit as integral as the joy I've felt. It is not a mental cancer.

And, to his own astonishment, and that of all the others in the ballroom, he calmly rose to his feet, ignored the cold glare of O'Hara and walked out.

"Please excuse," he muttered in his strange English to anyone who might listen. "But this is no more than simple brainwashing exercise." Ж

Outside the ballroom, in the corridor, a man whom Crisk didn't recognise accosted him. He was flanked by two boiler-suited operatives, the kind Crisk had seen emerging from the Glyphotech van that had been parked outside the Mare Publishing co.

"Are you leaving?" the man said in a tone that was firm yet offered the prospect of reconciliation. "I'd advise you not to. The very fact that you desire to quit now is the strongest indication of how much you are in need of our assistance."

He didn't acknowledge the presence of the two menacing figures either side of him though their unspoken participation in this blatant attempt at coercion was clear.

Crisk saw that the workers of Glyphotech looked even weirder close up

than from a distance. For some bizarre reason the sleeves of their black boiler suits were too long and flopped over at the ends, totally concealing their hands. Their deathly white faces were absolutely expressionless, so much so that their features, the slash-like mouths and inkblot eyes, looked uncannily as if they'd been worked into soft white putty rather than flesh.
"I made stupid mistake," said Crisk,."Absolutely the blame is mine. Further explanation not necessary. Now I will go."
The other man just stood there silently, as if weighing up his options. Crisk became uneasy. His eyes flickered to the name badge the man wore (no one was permitted to remove them whilst the seminar was in progress) and to the indistinct faces of the Glyphotech operatives. He addressed the man personally.
"Mr Collins, I will have you let me pass," said Crisk, his voice admirably level and betraying no sense of the fear gnawing at his innards. "Have told friends that if I do not call them at 5pm they are to come here and collect me. If necessary, with police. Reason being, prewarned by colleague against attendance at Glyphotech reconstruction seminar. Such precaution unfortunate but necessary, I felt."
"Not in the least necessary, I assure you Mr Crisk. We are not in the business of press-ganging people into our circle of friends. If you feel that you must leave, then do so. You are free to make whatever choice you wish," Collins replied. There was an edge in his voice though, and the last few words were almost a hiss.
Crisk brushed past the three men, through the lobby and out of the Grantham Hall Hotel. He was already beginning to dread the reception he would receive from O'Hara when he turned up for work on Monday morning, if that is, he still had a job at the Mare Publishing Co. ЖК
But on Monday morning it was as if his conduct were forgotten. O'Hara greeted him with a pleasant smile (though Crisk admitted to himself that the sight of O'Hara grinning was horrible in its own way) and Crisk began his computer inputting as usual. He did detect a new furtiveness in his office colleagues however, but it was hardly sinister, more like they felt somewhat sorry for him. He could not help noticing that they now employed Glyphotech terminology in a lot of their talk, and went about their duties much more assiduously than before.
It was only after he got home to his flat that same evening that he was made aware there were, after all, certain consequences resulting from his having

failed to complete the seminar. The phone rang at 7.30pm, just as he was preparing some sushi for dinner.
“Hello, Mr Crisk, it’s John Collins here, from Glyphotech. I hope you don’t mind me calling but I wanted to go over the conversation we had when last we met, at the seminar, you remember.”
Inwardly, Crisk groaned. He felt the urge to slam down the telephone but his sense of gentility prevented him from doing so.
“To speak the truth nothing more to say,” Crisk responded. “Now busy preparing food. Cannot talk, even prefer not to … ”
“This won’t take long, I assure you,” Collins said, cutting in. “I just wanted to let you know that there’s another course beginning at the end of this week and that we’d be happy to welcome you along. Forget what happened before, and make a fresh start. Many of our best friends took their time coming around to total acceptance of the benefits Glyphotech can provide.”
“Sorry but I have no interest,” Crisk said sharply.
“Please reconsider. No need to be hasty. Think about it. I’ll call you back tomorrow or whenever is convenient. You see it’s not possible for you to phone us, it’s against protocol.”
“Do not call again. How did you obtain my number at home? Intrusion of privacy: will advise telephone company of this outrage … ”
“Let me be frank with you Mr Crisk. We checked. We know that what you said about your friends coming to take you from the seminar was just a monologue you’d created. You see we have lists of your calls; the Phone Company understood it was for your own good. Their managers and employees found a recent Glyphotech seminar of great use in reconstructing their … ”
Crisk hung up. Then he dialled the operator’s number.
“Hello operator?” he said. “I am Franklyn Crisk, calling from phone 456 67304. I wish to report unwelcome intrusion of privacy by Glyphotech Recon … ”
“Of course, Sir,” a dull voice cut in. “I’ll transfer you to the appropriate department.”
But the number he was transferred to just rang and rang without ever being answered. And when he spoke to the operator for a second time all that happened was that he was transferred nearly immediately to the unanswered line again, without even being given the opportunity to finish uttering a complete sentence. After the seventh attempt he gave up. Ж

A scant two days later Crisk realised that what he had at first taken for amused condescension on the part of O'Hara and his office colleagues was the primary stage of tactical psychological warfare. Crisk suspected that he had initially been given the benefit of the doubt. Their self-belief in the validity of Glyphotech's reconstruction seminar made them think that he would eventually come to embrace its tenets, despite his faltering start and refusal to co-operate. But as the days passed and he was still clearly as antagonistic to the idea as he had been when he'd walked out of the seminar in front of everyone, their attitude changed slightly. Although never outwardly hostile it became obtrusive. Scarcely an hour would pass without some employee making a remark about how Glyphotech's technology had improved their lives beyond recognition, how much happier they were in their work, or how much they were looking forward to socialising with their fellow seminar attendees. These comments were made deliberately within Crisk's earshot, presumably with the intention of making him feel left out, peculiar or downright freakish in not having realised its benefits.

John Collins, or some other Glyphotech devotee, still telephoned him at his flat, sometimes three or four times an evening, but Crisk would cut the conversation short by slamming down the receiver the moment he recognised the voice. That they had resorted to using a rota of individuals so that he was off-guard when he answered almost drove him to distraction. And Crisk's attempts to contact the Phone Company and have the matter dealt with proved as futile as before. He was beginning to believe it really was just another branch of the Glyphotech phenomenon.

Although these developments were unnerving enough in themselves, they were not as unnerving as the fact that Crisk discovered he was being watched. A Glyphotech Reconstruction Company van had parked itself on the street directly opposite the building in which his flat was situated. In the evenings, when Crisk glanced out of his window, it was always there, a dirty green vehicle with white-faced operatives clearly visible through the windscreen, who peered up at him with eyes like dark smudges.

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Another week passed. Crisk had given the Mare Publishing Company no

excuse to terminate his employment, since he ensured that his work and time keeping were beyond reproach. O'Hara and his colleagues became increasingly resentful of his intransigence and their former cheerfulness seemed somehow brittle, as if his own presence was a factor in their discomfort. Whether this was the case or not, he was sure they would never dare admit to it. He began to suspect that the persons who had completed the seminar and who claimed to have got the most from it harboured a real sense of dread at letting Glyphotech down by admitting any tiny doubt as to the success of their psychological reconstruction. All of them were now paying considerable amounts of money in order to attend advanced courses. The Mare Publishing Company gave interestfree loans to those who could not afford to pay so that their continued participation was ensured.

The effect the stress had upon Crisk was that he suffered episodes of insomnia. Still, he felt some comfort, at least, from the fact that the Glyphotech rota of phone callers had finally ceased their campaign to persuade him to change his mind. However, when at work, and when walking home to his flat from the office, he thought he detected unusually intense and hate-filled stares from passers-by. Moreover, he could not rid himself of the persistent notion that he saw alarming physiognomic alterations in large numbers of the people whom he encountered. Those who stared at him for too long seemed to be developing black smudged eyes that were sinking back into their sockets, whilst their hands, digits and fingernails were of a horribly abnormal length.

An open-top lorry carrying scaffolding equipment had recently joined the van parked outside Crisk's flat. The lorry also bore the Glyphotech logo emblazoned across both its sides. Crisk had noticed that the company had recently added scaffolding to its ever-growing list of enterprises. It made some vague sense, seeing as they had, he'd read in a newspaper, secured contracts to refurbish a large number of buildings throughout the city. The latticed scaffolding structures and plasticsheeted fronts with their logo were becoming evident almost everywhere one looked.

Although Crisk hoped that this new activity might, at least, divert some of their energies away from their bogus psychological reprogramming of the populace, he tried to avoid passing buildings fronted by the Glyphotech scaffolding as much as possible. From behind the sheets of opaque white plastic attached to the poles and clamps, he clearly heard the sound of scratching, as if dozens of long fingernails were clawing over and over

again at glass, brick and concrete. Ж
In order to calm his nerves after his fractious working day, Crisk would often pass a couple of hours drinking in a bar in a back street close to the Mare Publishing Company's offices. None of the other employees spent time at this bar anymore; teetotalism being Glyphotech protocol. It was a quiet, dark place, and good for quiet reflection.
As he sat there sipping a pint of beer, a man whose head was wrapped in bandages entered. Crisk tried not to stare but couldn't help pity the fellow. He must have been involved in quite a nasty accident. Instead of going up to the counter, however, the stranger made straight for Crisk and slumped in the seat directly opposite him.
"How are you, Crisk?" he said in a voice that, though croaky, Crisk recognised as belonging to the former Mare employee David Hogg.
"I have troubles," Crisk replied. "But none to compare to your own, I think. You have met with an accident, I suppose. It is very unfortunate, especially coming after your dismissal."
Hogg's eyes, staring out through holes in the bandages, were watery. Beneath the wrappings there seemed to be neither a nose nor cheeks, only deep hollows. He spoke again:
"I thought that those at Mare who didn't succumb to the Glyphotech brainwashing might come in here now and again for a drink. The converts hate the stuff of course. But I admit that I didn't think you personally would reject the seminar, seeing as you were such a loyal company man."
Crisk wasn't certain whether Hogg was complimenting or denigrating him, perhaps a mixture of both.
"Glyphotech repulsive organisation," Crisk said. "Attack free thought, harasses ones who speak against it. Any honourable man who understands duty would do as I did."
"Could you buy me a drink, Crisk? I'm sorry to ask. But I have no money, and I need one rather badly. In return I'll give you some advice. It's a small price to pay in exchange, believe me."
"Advice? Explain please."
"After the drink," Hogg responded.
Crisk returned to the table with another beer for himself and a double Scotch and soda for Hogg. He guzzled the amber fluid rapidly through the mouth-slit in his wrappings, spilling a few drops onto the bandage around his chin.

“How far into the seminar did you get?” Hogg asked, putting the half-empty glass down.
“First day, about five hours. Left when … ”
“I did the whole day,” Hogg cut in, “and most of the next. They nearly got me. That was back before I joined Mare. I left my previous job because I saw what the Glyphotech seminar did to the company. But Glyphotech wouldn’t let me reject what it was offering. They kept phoning me at home, and my then office colleagues ostracised me for not enrolling, since they themselves had all done so. By now, you must be experiencing something similar.”
Crisk nodded. He felt a deep sense of shame at having badly misjudged Hogg.
“They no longer ring me,” Crisk responded.
Hogg seemed to be agitated rather than soothed by the news.
“You realise they don’t actually have a working centre of operations, don’t you?” Hogg said. “I mean, they say they do. But it’s just an empty old office somewhere with a desk and a telephone and no one around to answer it. The calls they harass you with don’t come from there. I don’t even know if that swine Yubon has ever been to the office. It’s against protocol to ask about the place.”
The bandaged man reached for the remains of his Scotch and soda and downed it with a single gulp.
“Another, how about?” Crisk asked him.
“Get the bottle,” Hogg replied; coughing a little as the alcohol made his throat tighten.
The two men drank heavily.
“You know,” Hogg said, his voice slightly slurred by the booze, “what happens on day two? They tell you about the core of their mental technology. The bastards repeat their propaganda over and over again, until it begins to make sense, until, as they say—you reach the understanding. It’s called the suicide-resolution. Funny isn’t it, in a grim way? The suicide-resolution. When you accept that final piece of the jigsaw, you belong to them, utterly and totally. I didn’t. What they tell attendees is that the suicide-resolution is the secret of extracting the maximum joy from life, living each day like your last: because soon it really will be. And everyone, by then, is so brainwashed they believe it.”
“Too fantastic: ask people to kill themselves?” Crisk responded. “Such

things cannot be, except in trashy horror tales of the worst type. Why not inform the police?"
"You don't understand, they RUN everything," Hogg spluttered. "Anyway, you didn't get as far into it as I did. By day two you'll swallow all they say. Brainwashing only works when the victims refuse to accept they've been brainwashed. The suicide-resolution is bad enough, but it's what comes after that's even worse. Things don't end there; suicide's just the beginning. The technology somehow works on parts of the brain we don't normally use. It ensures you come back afterwards so that they can carry on with the reconstruction process, carry on with it even after you're dead. Glyphotech never let go. Never, ever."
Crisk suspected Hogg had gone mad. He was pointing to the bandages in which his head was swathed.
"I'm telling you they nearly had me Crisk! Leave while you still can. Don't hang around like I did. Those ghouls managed to get to my face before I … "
Crisk stumbled to his feet. He didn't care whether Hogg was telling the truth or not: he could take no more, and left the bar without looking back.
" … get out of the city Crisk," Hogg cried behind him. "When they stop calling you it means they'll take more drastic measures."

The next day Crisk left the Mare Publishing Company for good. What Hogg had told him the previous night made a horrible kind of sense, even if he could not accept every word of it as literal truth.

He had, however, noted the same physiognomic mutations occurring in his office colleagues that he'd observed develop in the people on the streets. Perhaps it was some disease, but he was baffled at the fact no one had commented upon its having been allowed to spread unchecked.

He would quit his job without giving notice, go home, pack some of his belongings in a couple of suitcases and leave the city by the first available train out. Unless he took this decisive action he felt he might well trip over the edge of reason and go completely insane, as Hogg had done. He told no one of his plans and walked out of the Mare Publishing Company at 6pm as usual.

Only O’Hara saw him depart and, to Crisk’s horror, his boss raised a hand with abnormally long digits and nails and gave him a mock-ironic farewell wave. There was a horrible knowing smile beneath his smudgy eyes.

ЖК

It was a 10-minute walk, at a leisurely pace, from the office to Crisk’s flat. But he covered the distance in half that time, breaking into a trot as often as he could and only slowing to a normal pace when breathless. Already he was going over in his mind what he would take with him: the bare essentials, cash he’d saved for an emergency, some clothing, toiletries and perhaps one or two treasured items he’d brought back from Kyoto; his tea-set and sake bowls. Yes, they had “wabi” and could not be left behind.

Crisk tried to avoid looking at the people he passed in the street and at the buildings. He knew the way almost by instinct in any case. When, however, he finally reached his flat he saw, with a jolt of panic, that Glyphotech scaffolding covered the front of the building all the way to the top. On the other side of the street the truck with the poles was no longer there, though the other vehicle, the dirty green van, remained. However there didn’t seem to be any Glyphotech operatives inside.

Had he not needed the cash he’d put away in the drawer of his bureau for the train-fare, he would have abandoned any notion of going up to his flat, deeming the risk too great. Instead, he stood out on the street and then cautiously moved towards the sheets and poles, straining his ears to detect noise from within the structure. He waited for several minutes, but heard nothing. Perhaps, if he were quick, he might get in and out without being noticed. Crisk always bolted his windows from the inside and was confident that any break-in would have aroused too much attention, so he doubted that intruders were lying in wait for him within the flat itself.

He let himself in through the front door, passed along the hallway and ascended the stairs. The light bulbs had blown on the second floor, so he had to pass through a pool of darkness before reaching the third where his own flat was situated. Unlocking it quietly, he opened the door halfway,

reached in and turned on the light switch just to the right of the entrance. Then he entered.

Everything was as he'd left it that morning and he saw, with relief, that the windows were still bolted and closed. The scaffold platform and its opaque plastic sheeting closed off the usual view. But there was no one out there. He left the door slightly ajar behind him for a quick exit should it prove necessary.

After removing the cash from his bureau and transferring it to his wallet, he took two suitcases from underneath his bed and began packing them as swiftly as he was able. The tea-set and sake bowls were the most troublesome, as they were quite delicate and required careful wrapping in layers of newspaper.

Then he heard loud scuffling noises. Several people seemed to be frantically climbing the ladders that led from one platform of the scaffolding to the next. They were headed in his direction; there could be no doubt about it. Crisk spun around to the door, his only escape route, and saw a horribly long hand snaking around the edge, as if someone were about to push it open and enter his flat. He dashed across the room in and tried to jam the door shut, trapping the hand. It was attenuated and spider-like, and the fingers twitched convulsively as Crisk put all his weight into his shoulder, ultimately succeeding in forcing the door shut. As it closed tight, the digits on the hand squashed and broke off as if made from damp putty.

Directly behind him Crisk heard the sound of fingernails scratching upon the window-pane. He turned and saw half a dozen deathly-white faces leering through the glass. The things were all clawing idiotically at the surface.

Crisk picked up the telephone and frantically dialled the operator. He was transferred to another line at once, without saying a word, and heard the familiar ringing tone begin. Perhaps if he could get through to Glyphotech, he hoped, if he could persuade them he'd changed his mind, there might still be a chance.

"Answer it," he mumbled to himself. "Answer it, answer it … "

Just before the window shattered and the things crawled over the sill towards him, raking their hellish fingernails across everything they touched, Crisk thought of the dusty and empty office, long disused, where an unattended telephone rang and rang.

# SENTINELS

INSPECTOR GRAY'S INVOLVEMENT in the affair was due to a combination of ill fortune and the photographic cover of a London "urban legends" paperback called *The Secret Underground*. He should not really have been in that part of London at the time, but had been forced to stay late in the office and complete a batch of gruelling paperwork required by his superior the following morning. Had he driven past a matter of seconds before, he would have seen nothing. After all, he was off-duty and his main concern was to get back to his dingy flat in Tufnell Park, sink a few glasses of whiskey and forget about that day.

He planned to lose himself in some cheap and trashy horror paperback from his little collection. The TV had broken down months ago and instead of replacing it he found that he had got into the habit of reading musty book relics from the 60s and 70s, with their yellowing, brittle pages and lurid covers. Gray fancied himself something of a connoisseur when it came to the covers; in fact he felt himself in opposition with the old maxim about never judging a book by them. He harboured the conviction that those featuring a weird photographic composition were invariably superior to those that had artwork depicting the tired cliché-symbols of horror; skulls, snakes or gothic castles for example.

In fact, he had come in for some jokes at his expense back at the Yard over his choice of reading matter. Most of his colleagues talked about little except what they watched on TV the night before, often sleazy porn videos that they'd "loaned" from the Obscene Publications division. They'd taken to calling him "The Weird Detective" behind his back and on one occasion he'd turned around sharply to find a group of constables miming having vampire fangs by putting their index fingers at the corners of their mouths. Gray made sure thereafter that he wasn't seen reading any of his books during the little time he had for lunch. Instead he read one of the broadsheet papers as he consumed his sandwiches at his desk. His alienation from his

colleagues caused him pain and he suspected that the department would run more smoothly were he not there.

What Gray saw as he passed by in his car appeared to be some sort of stunted, emaciated creature peering through the trellis gates of Kentish Town Underground Station. The thing was only around four or five feet tall and dressed in black ragged overalls. Its face was obscured by a mass of dusty shoulder-length hair.

It was gone 1am when Gray passed the Underground Station, and it had been closed for only a short time. He had pulled over to the side of the road and looked back in order to see whether the apparition was still there, but there was no sign of it at all. Doubtless, he thought, his colleagues back at the Yard would have laughed at what he thought he saw; too many of those damn books he read. But Gray felt his heart racing in his chest. He could not dismiss the thing that easily from his mind. What he'd seen was no product of the imagination. It had really been there.

Although the station was closed, it might not yet be deserted. Once the train service finished there were still staff working on the platforms and in the tunnels. An army of cleaners called "Fluffers" made their way along the lines and scoured them for debris. All manner of litter had to be cleared away, beer-cans, half-eaten junk food, newspapers, even tumbleweeds composed of skin and human hair. There was also the "Gangers"; the engineers who checked track safety. Perhaps Gray had simply glimpsed one of those overnight workers having a break, one whose similarity to the uncanny thing on the front cover of *The Secret Underground* was nothing more than a trick of the light.

Nevertheless, what he had observed remained in his thoughts, causing uneasy dreams when he finally slept: dreams of endless subterranean tunnels and of a gaunt silence punctuated by a distant rustling or whispering noise. Had he not seen whatever it was at the station (or whatever *he thought* it was) the case that came to his attention afterwards might not have seemed significant and worth pursuit.

Ж

As he sat at his desk the next morning, sipping at a cup of vile instant coffee, Gray flicked through the case files in his in-box. He had a feeling that had become increasingly commonplace during the course of the last few months. It was that the investigations to which he had been assigned were effectively a waste of effort. The assault that he'd suffered months ago during the arrest of Montrose the serial rapist had left him hospitalised for weeks and resulted in internal ruptures that would, he had been advised by the surgeon, require a much more sedate lifestyle. The Yard had done the best they could under the circumstances and found him a role, albeit desk bound, but although his initial assignments had been current Gray discovered that as time passed he was being asked to examine cases that had little chance of being solved. The bulk of these were missing persons.

Scarcely sociable before, Gray had turned further inwards after the beating. It had affected his mind just as much as his body. Somehow he had allowed his old friends to drift away and found excuses not to keep in touch with them. He felt himself to be little more than an empty shell and contact with others only served to reinforce the impression. The Yard offered Gray counselling to help him come to terms with the trauma caused by the Montrose incident, but he found the idea even more repellent than his doctor's suggestion that he take a course of antidepressants. When fate worked upon him he intended to adapt to it and not resist. Even so, he felt like a missing person who had himself been assigned to trace other missing persons.

Gray ran his tongue over his scalded lips, again cursing the too-hot and foul-tasting coffee, when his attention was taken up by a communiqué that had come in only a few hours earlier. Although a missing persons report is not usually filed until some days after a disappearance (except where children are involved), this one had been "fast-tracked" due to there being no question of the subject having absented himself deliberately. The missing individual was a tube train driver (or "operator" as they were now called). His name was Adam Drayton. The curious thing was this: he had abandoned his train between the Camden Town and Kentish Town stations on the Northern Line. It had been the very last service of the night, due to

terminate at High Barnet at 1.30am. Moreover, if there had been any passengers in the carriages then they too had vanished.

Early in the morning a replacement driver had shunted the train into a siding. On the front of the case file a joker in the office had scrawled the words “Mary Celeste Tube? A Case for the Weird Detective?” with a marker pen.

But Inspector Gray, through some bizarre coincidence, was one of the few people who would recognise the name “Adam Drayton” in another connection. For it was also the name of the author/editor of that outré book of urban legends published under the title *The Secret Underground*, whose cover preyed upon his mind.

ЖК

Gray spent the afternoon interviewing Drayton’s colleagues in the staff mess room of the train depot just outside Finchley Central Station. This was where the tube drivers spent their time between shifts, sitting around drinking coffee, smoking their cigarettes and reading newspapers. They were a talkative bunch although the inspector could not help noticing their mistrust and fear of him as a representative from an outside authority. Some of them even seemed to believe that Drayton’s disappearance was an internal matter and should be left to the union to investigate. Outside interference, whether from the law or elsewhere, was certainly not welcome. Still, there were one or two who retained a sense of individuality and were able to realise that Gray had not come in order to apportion any blame, merely to discover what may have led Drayton to act in the manner that he did.

One of the drivers, Carlos Miguel, a Castilian, was particularly communicative. He had settled in this country after leaving Madrid in the early 1990s. He had been almost alone in befriending Drayton, who had been regarded by the others as an oddball whose political views were not sufficiently radical. Miguel was a tall, distinguished man in his forties with a shock of jet-black hair and a neatly trimmed moustache. He had shared Drayton’s enthusiasm for the recondite and whilst the others talked of union

activities or the football results, the two men had retreated to a corner and held their own discussions.

Had Gray not been aware of Drayton's editorship of that paperback *The Secret Underground* he doubted that he would have achieved quite the same rapport with Carlos Miguel.

"So," the Spaniard declared, "you know of *el libro de Drayton*?"

"Yes," Gray replied. "I think it's a bit garish but the cover's particularly…"
Miguel cut in.
"*Señor*, you know that Drayton only applied to become a train operator so that he could travel the tunnels of the Northern Line and examine their mysteries?"
Gray looked blank and shook his head.
"Well," Miguel went on, "you must understand that it would not be mistaken to say that he was obsessed with them. Drayton told me that the Northern Line has the longest continuous Yerkes tunnel on the network, over 17 miles long. The stretch between East Finchley and Morden. Also it has the deepest. At Hampstead 900 feet below ground. He had numerous theories about what was down there; *fantástico, ¿no?*"
"Speculations, rumour, hearsay," Gray responded. "Amounting to nothing more than fiction. He was just an editor of a horrible series of urban legends. I confess that the parallel between his disappearance and obsession is striking but…"
"*Perdón, señor*, but it is more than that simple fact. Drayton was my friend; it was in me that he felt he could confide. *Las estaciones fantasmas*, you know of them? In English: the ghost stations? North End, City Road, South Kentish Town and King William Street? These were what obsessed Drayton."
"The abandoned stations?"
"*Sí*, abandoned. *Pero* in Drayton's eyes, *no*. Taken over he would have replied. No longer safe to use. *Señor*, if you are operating the last train on the line it is easier to slow down when you wish, no? Perhaps while travelling through one of those stations and even bringing trains to a complete stop. There are not so many passengers and they are too drunk or sleepy to complain at that time of night, ¿*tú comprendes*?"

“Are you suggesting that Adam Drayton stopped his train and got out at one of these ghost stations?”
“*Como una palomilla atraída por la llama…*”
“I don’t understand.”
“…like a moth drawn to a flame.”

Ж

That evening, once Gray had got back to his cramped flat in Tufnell Park, he sat down in his easy chair with his copy of *The Secret Underground*. He flicked back and forth through its yellowed brittle pages, glancing at them over and over again. The book was divided into several chapters, each specialising in a subterranean urban legend: (1) Cases of Posthumous Mutation in London Cemeteries (2) Derelict reverse Skyscrapers 1936-1957 (3) Mass disappearance of Persons sheltering in the Underground during the Blitz (4) Graffiti or Occult Symbolism? (5) Suppressed Eyewitness accounts during the Construction of the Underground Railways 1860-1976 (6) The Fleet Line extension to Fenchurch Street must be Halted (7) Secret Bunkers or Extermination Centres? (8) The deep level Platforms of the proposed Express Tube: Why they caused Insanity (9) The Hidden Shafts that connect Subterranean London.
There was one paragraph in the final chapter that seemed to be the inspiration for the uneasy dreams Gray had experienced. It ran as follows:

“ *Most of the city is now underground and not above the surface, and I scarcely need list its innumerable tunnels, subterranean car parks, cellars, crypts, bunkers, basements, vaults, passageways, and sewers. Every building in London has an underside buried deep in the earth. Beneath our feet are the ruins of Anglo-Saxon Lundenwic and of Roman Londinium. The contemporary city will, in time, be swallowed up. This neon and concrete labyrinth will become an Atlantis of catacombs. The higher we build up, the deeper it is necessary to build down in order to support the structures above. All the nightmare sewage that we pump into the depths, all the foulness and corruption, the abortions, the faeces and scum, the blood and diseased mucus, but mostly the hair: what a feast for those underground*

*beings that exist in darkness, and shun the sunlight! Those things below hate us and have every reason to do so.*"

His attention kept jumping from the text to the series of bizarre black and white photographs throughout the book. Quite where Drayton had obtained them from was not made clear; they were not credited. They may even have come from his personal collection and consisted of the following:

(Front cover) A blurred humanoid figure seen from a passing tube train whose face is almost completely covered by its hair. Between the strands there seems to be a mouth lined with shark-like fangs. The haggard creature is backing into a siding, away from the light.

(pg.18) A photographic record of a series of exhumed graves with empty coffins whose bases had been torn apart.

(pg.33) A blueprint of a subterranean reverse-tower with forty-five storeys and access shafts radiating from it in all directions, some leading to burial grounds, others to sewers etc. bearing the legend "North End (Hampstead)".

(pg.49) What appears to be a series of bloody, smeared handprints on the white wall tiles of British Museum Station during its use as an airraid shelter circa 1941.

(pg.87) Human bones, including a skull, photographed lying alongside the tracks of an Underground tunnel.

(pg.102) Graffiti scrawled (in charcoal?) on the side of 1972 Mk. 1 train stock that reads "THE HUNGRY CANNOT SLEEP", "WE CRAWL THROUGH GRAVES", "THE DARKNESS BEHIND YOUR EYES" and "BELOW THERE IS ONLY PAIN".

(pg.126) A sewer chamber choked by vast quantities of hair hanging from a curved ceiling of Victorian brickwork.

Ж

It was relatively easy for Gray to obtain a search warrant in order to enter the disused South Kentish Town station. Although above ground the building was now occupied by a massage parlour where once the ticket hall had been, all the subterranean shafts, corridors and other passageways were still owned by London Underground. Since their abandonment there had been no reason to maintain them and parts of the former station were unsafe. In order to gain access Gray had to agree to be accompanied by a track maintenance engineer who worked on that stretch of the Northern Line and who was familiar with the site.

This engineer, John Heath, arranged to meet Gray outside the massage parlour at the corner of Kentish Town Road and Castle Place. The inspector parked his car directly in front of the building and was struck by the fact that its exterior still had the appearance of an Underground Station, lacking only the familiar sign displayed outside. Hanging around in front of the entrance to the newsagents was a small man in a yellow safety helmet and boiler suit. He carried a heavy bag with a sub-contractors logo on it. His hands were entirely covered with a thick layer of soot. Doubtless it was the man who had been assigned to assist Gray.

Heath looked just like a throwback to the 1960s. His hippie-length hair was brittle and grey as dust. Over his mouth and nose he wore a loose protective mask. He also wore a pair of John Lennon style glasses with thick lenses that made the eyes behind them look liquid. He was really quite horribly ridiculous.

After Gray had produced his police ID, the two went inside, and the Inspector explained their purpose to the owners of the massage parlour (who seemed relieved that the search was not connected with what went on at their premises). Then Heath, consulting a map of the structure, led Gray down into a storage cellar at the back of the establishment where access to the emergency stairs could be gained.

The old lift shafts were useless. Their cages and all the workings had been removed back when the station was closed in 1924, but the stairway to the upper lift landing and the emergency staircase to the lower lift landing were passable. The entry doors were padlocked and Heath sought and tried

several keys drawn from his bag before he found the correct ones to use.
“They,” Heath said, his voice muffled by the baggy mask covering his mouth and nose, “told me why you want to get down here. Anyway it’s pointless. We already looked for Drayton. All you’re doing is putting yourself in danger.”
“I’ll be the judge of that,” replied Gray. “Just get on with it. You do your job and I’ll do mine, OK?”
“Watch your step as we go. These old passageways are treacherous. Even if you don’t wind up falling into a ventilation shaft, you might stumble in front of a passing train. Hear the noise?”
As he unlocked the door there came from far below in the depths the sound of carriages rumbling along distant tracks, followed moments later by a powerful draught of musty air.
Heath chuckled. He turned on a powerful torch and aimed its beam along the stairway and around to the dark-green tiled walls at the turn ahead. The steps were littered with debris.
Gray was amazed at how familiar and yet how strange their surroundings appeared. Like any Londoner he had used the tube system on innumerable occasions and had passed through the subterranean mazes of many stations, though always when they were illuminated by overhead strip lighting, with hurried passengers making their way to or from a platform. But here the darkness was in control and every echoing footfall reinforced the grim feeling of total isolation. And yet it was only the withdrawal of light and of other people that created this feeling: actually it was just the same as any other tube station would be after the services had stopped running. Except that this was no temporary interruption to be resumed in the morning. This really was what Carlos Miguel called *Una estación fantasma.*
“Did you know Adam Drayton?” Gray asked in order to break the gaunt silence between the sound of passing trains.
He could only see the back of Heath. The engineer’s slightly hunched form crept downwards along the steps, apparently intent solely upon what he was doing. But he finally responded after what seemed to be a considered pause.
“Oh yes,” Heath said. “I knew *of* him all right. He was legendary on the Northern Line. Kept stopping his train at odd places and holding up the services. Only worked at night, when it didn’t matter so much. The union stepped in to stop him getting the sack, said he was worried about safety.”
“Safety?”

“The union said it was faulty signals that were to blame. And strange noises on the track. Made him cautious. Better to be safe than sorry. Go-slow is preferable to taking chances. That’s what the union said.”
They had reached the bottom of the stairway and emerged onto the upper lift landing. The tiles here were a grimy cream and red colour. In the circle of light cast by Heath’s torch, he caught glimpses of advertising posters from the early 1920s that had been left up on the tiled walls of the corridor ahead; “Lifebuoy”, “Bovril”, “Oxo”, “Wrigley’s” and “Guinness”. Another tube train roared through one of the tunnels below and the accompanying blast of air flapped the torn parts of the posters.
“What do you know about the disused stations here on the Northern Line? Have you seen the others for yourself?” Gray asked.
“I know something. I’ve been in them all at one time or another. They have a bad reputation. The most significant is North End or the “Bull & Bush” as the train operators like to call it,” Heath responded.
“Why significant?”
“The floodgates, y’know.” said Heath. “Instead of the tube station that was going to be there in 1906 they developed it into a central command centre. Certain stations on the network have the gates, but they’re all controlled from North End. Reckon the building goes down more than a thousand feet, though only the higher levels were initially used. It was started in the 1940s so they could stop the entire Underground system being flooded. Most of the gates were individually controlled before then.”
“How could the whole system be flooded?”
“If the Nazis had dropped a bomb in the Thames the tunnels under the river could have collapsed. Within ten minutes the Underground system would have been completely filled with water and submerged, y’know. Well, that’s what they said. Later on, in the early 1970s, they built a second zone of gates just outside stations like Shepherds Bush, Aldgate East and Bounds Green, before where the tracks emerge overground.”
“What have they got to do with flooding?”
“Nothing. But they thought people would go mental when the threeminute warnings went off and try to run along the tracks into the train tunnels to escape from Soviet atom bombs. Well, you get the idea…” By now they’d reached the emergency spiral stairway, which led much further downward to the lower lift landing. It was considerably steeper than the previous stairway and Gray kept a hand against the wall as the two men descended.

Their footfalls echoed as if ghosts were following close behind.
“Talking of weird stuff like that, you know about the Sentinel Train?” Heath asked. He didn’t wait for an answer before continuing with his topic. “First stop King William Street station along the abandoned spur, runs down to Borough without halting, then reverses up the Bank branch of the Northern Line. Only stops at the ghost stations along the route; nowhere else, goes on to City Road, right here to South Kentish Town, then back via Camden, before terminating at the deepest of all: North End, under Hampstead Heath. Anyway, I told you about that one didn’t I? The Sentinel lets the inspection crews examine the stuff the public never sees. Company doesn’t leave the traction current to the rails on overnight, so a diesel locomotive pulls the old F Stock carriages. The train has a free run on the deserted tracks. Happens once a week or thereabouts. Every tube line has its own Sentinel.”
“Are you pulling my leg?” Gray replied testily. “That’s straight out of Drayton’s book. It seems to me you must have read it.”
They’d reached the lower lift landing.
“This passageway leads to the north and southbound platforms,” Heath said, “but they’re long gone.”
Were the idea not totally ridiculous Gray could have mistaken his companion for something dressed up in a boiler suit in order to pass as human. His colleagues at the Yard would have laughed at his suspicion. But he could not shake off the impression that, in the darkness, Heath’s appearance was genuinely similar to the figure that Gray had glimpsed peering out of the trellised gates of Kentish Town Station. That was only a few nights ago and one stop along the Northern Line from this ghost station. He’d seen it with his own eyes and the experience was not drawn from the pages of a crazy book like *The Secret Underground*. Gray could easily believe that this character Heath had not just read the volume but had stepped out from its pages into life.
“You didn’t answer my question.” Gray said. From his coat pocket he drew a packet of Benson & Hedges cigarettes.
“What one was that again?” Heath snuffled.
“The one about having read *The Secret Underground*.” Gray responded as he jammed one of the smokes between his lips and touched the end with the flame from a battered old Zippo. A faint smell of petrol wafted from the lighter. He drew on the cigarette and exhaled, sending curling blue smoke

across the beam of Heath's torch.
"Oh that … look, you can't smoke down here. It's dangerous."
"Do you see any 'No Smoking' signs around? Anyway I'm sure your mask will protect you."
Heath paused and regarded the glowing tip of Gray's cigarette. He finally came back to the point.
"Yeah, I've read that book. I know it off by heart. It's a favourite of mine."
From further back along the passageways Gray thought he detected a rustling noise, like a pile of leaves dispersed by the wind. But, before he was able to tell from which direction it came, the racket of a passing northbound train drowned them out. Gray thought he heard Heath muttering.
It sounded like " … bigmouth … Miguel … he's sorted … " but most of these words were also lost in the roar.
It was obvious that Heath knew something about Drayton's disappearance and may even have had a hand in it. Perhaps he was also dangerously obsessed with all those ghost stations and had come to regard Drayton as his rival. In any case, the place to interview Heath was back at the Yard, not here and now. Gray's back and stomach ached; the old ruptures were playing up again. It was time to get back to the surface. There was nothing down here that was of any use to his investigation. Besides, although Heath was small, Gray feared that he was dealing with a lunatic.
There was that damn rustling again! It sounded closer this time. Heath seemed not to notice it though and coldly regarded Gray smoking his cigarette, glaring through narrowed eyes that swam behind the thick lenses of his glasses.
"Well," said Gray, "I've seen everything I want to see here. Let's get back to the surface.
"Alright," Heath replied. "But you ain't looked yet. To come all this way and not look at it would be a waste of my time and yours."
"Look at what exactly?"
"Over there in the corner. Thirty yards, right up against the wall." Heath flashed the torch's beam onto what appeared to be a large pile of rags. "Go and see. I already know what it is. I'll stay where I am. In case you're worried, like."
As he got nearer, Gray glanced back to make sure that Heath made no attempt to creep up on him. What he believed was a pile of rags was in fact

a body slumped in the angle between wall and floor, its face turned towards the tiles. The back of its skull was smashed in. Dried blood caked the matted hair. As he turned the body over, Gray guessed that its face would be unfamiliar; he expected it to be Drayton, whom he'd never seen. But it was the Spaniard, Carlos Miguel. Heath had not moved an inch whilst Gray examined the corpse, but something living dropped from the darkness of the ceiling onto him and the impact drove the police inspector crashing to the floor.

His head struck the concrete and he blacked out.

Ж

Gray awoke in a tube train carriage. He felt nauseous with pain as consciousness returned. He ran his fingers over his head and found half a dozen scratches and wounds around his face and on the back of his skull. There was a stabbing pain in his stomach and he was aware of feeling wet around the seat of his trousers. The fall had reopened some of his old internal ruptures and blood was leaking out of his lower intestine.

Although wracked with pain, he forced himself to take in the details of his surroundings. He was on a moving train, one that hurtled through the tunnels at breakneck speed.

The floor was littered with prostrate bodies. Some were hanging by their necks from knotted leather straps attached to the ceiling rails. All had been recently murdered and bore signs of mutilation. There were dozens of the corpses packed into the carriage. Their limbs protruded at misshapen angles from the humps of flesh and clothing. Extreme terror and pain marked their facial expressions. The body of Carlos Miguel lay amongst the charnel crowds. Like the Castilian, Gray had been left for dead.

Somehow he'd come to be a passenger in a carriage that appeared to date from, he guessed, the 1920s. The carriage lights were single bulbs housed in Art-Deco glass oysters with a very wide aisle running between the longitudinal seating. It must have been antiquated rolling stock, for there were advertisements from that far-off decade above the windows and the Underground map showed routes such as the Hampstead and Highgate Line, the City and South London Railway and the Central London Railway.

Back then the Victoria and Jubilee lines had not even been thought of, let alone built. Moreover, the map was like a complicated tangle of spaghetti and not modelled on the famous Beck circuit-board design.

Struggling to his feet and clutching the pole at the end of the seats, Gray stood in a daze for a moment, rocking with the motion of the train. His wristwatch showed 1.20am. He'd been out cold for well over eight hours. His left trouser leg stuck to the inside of his thigh, where the stream of blood oozing from his rectum had partially dried. He picked his way through the corpses and found that he was trapped in the last carriage of the train and the connecting door to the penultimate carriage had been welded shut.

Gray crept back to a seat and peered through the window to the tunnels outside. Suddenly the train entered a platform, without slowing, and he pressed his face to the glass in order to try and make out the station name as it flashed past. The light from the interior of the carriages projected enough illumination for him to see a faded sign reading "North End". It also just made visible the stunted, faceless forms that haunted the shadows of passageways further back—forms that shunned the light, but which welcomed the arrival of the Sentinel with malefic glee, chattering deafeningly in the semi-darkness.

Gray had no doubt that the inner and outer gates were closed right the way across the Underground network, now that the Sentinel had completed its journey. He harboured the notion that these gates served a purpose quite different from the official one and were used to prevent escape along the tracks to the surface. Drayton had described many pieces of the jigsaw in his book *The Secret Underground*. Gray had not fitted them together until it was too late and would finally solve the mystery in the labyrinthine reaches of an industrial Sheol.

In his mind's eye he saw a vision in which the disparate chapters of Drayton's book merged to form a coherent explanation of what was happening. It was an explanation involving a series of derelict reverse skyscrapers, one of which was beneath North End, whose ultimate depth was probably over a thousand feet; a structure populated by beings who were sometimes bored with the repast foraged by using the smaller tunnels that led to the cemeteries and burial grounds across London. Could it be possible that the feasters had absorbed some of the characteristics of the corpses upon which they preyed, as in cannibalistic folklore?

He thought of an abandoned train and its driver … *Como una palomilla* … of a man called Heath with thick eyeglasses, his face obscured, and who knew as much as Drayton himself …

As he thought about the ghost stations on the Piccadilly Line, the Central Line, the Metropolitan Line and all the others, he guessed that each doubtless had its own Sentinel operating that night as well.

Suddenly, the lights in all the carriages went out.

Acting on the signal, as they'd done so many times in the past, they surged up from the edifice's black abyss of corridors and debris-choked rooms in a ravenous tide.

As the stunted forms eagerly scrambled across the divide between them and the train, he finally realised that, in order to keep them down there in the dark, to prevent them overrunning London altogether, it was necessary for them to be fed.

Gray only had time to scream once in the darkness.

# PATIENT 704

THE GLANVILLE HOME had long been regarded as a health farm in all but name rather than a bona-fide psychiatric welfare centre. Its patients were voluntary, invariably wealthy, admissions. Their most common complaints were overwork, stress, anxiety or related mental maladies. No serious psychological disturbances afflicted them. Such a situation at the home had pertained for twenty years. It was only in the last five that no inmates had departed from there. It was not that there was any variation in the type of admissions that the Home received, rather that, beyond a certain date, residents no longer seemed to recover from even minor mental complaints and appeared happy to stay on indefinitely.

When the regional health authority appointed me as an independent investigator into the allegations made against the Glanville Private Psychiatric Home, I thought that the matter would be cleared up quickly. What reports there had been in the press looked to me to be deliberately sensational, as if much more was being made of the so-called scandal than it warranted. When allegations of abuse originate from a single expatient with no supporting evidence, one should err on the side of caution. It was my belief that had this ex-patient not been a celebrity, the matter would have received little attention.

This much I had discerned from the records forwarded to me, once my enquiry was underway. I did find it curious that Dr. Arnold, the head of the institution, seemed pathetically anxious to keep me from visiting the place. Otherwise, he was very co-operative and I believed his professed desire to bring the enquiry to a swift and satisfactory end was genuine. So his obvious reluctance to allow me to examine the premises and interview some of the patients face to face was mysterious. He must have known that a personal visit was a mere matter of course in such cases.

Looking back I do not doubt that if Dr. Arnold had invited me to make such a visit from the outset I would have instead put it off. My initial instincts were not to waste time pursuing the allegations of a faded celebrity who appeared to be creating a scandal simply to raise her profile in the newspapers. However, I was obliged to insist on being granted unhindered access to all areas and patient records at the Glanville Home as a matter of urgency, despite my own feelings.

Fortunately, he eventually saw reason and agreed to my demand. My visit was arranged for early the following week, just before I was to leave for Scotland on my annual fishing holiday.

The Glanville Home, a redbrick Edwardian structure covered with ivy, was set in well-tended and luxuriant grounds. As I motored up the gravel driveway, the sun was shining in a cloudless blue sky. I could imagine a no more suitable place for a wealthy neurasthenic to seek rest and recuperation.

A figure in a white doctor's coat waved in welcome as my car approached the main building. Once I had drawn up alongside the set of stairs leading to the entrance this person descended and opened the car door for me.

He introduced himself as Dr. Arnold. He was younger than I imagined him to be, only in his late twenties or early thirties. His hair was dishevelled and there was at least two days' stubble around his chin. I noticed that he seemed to have made only a feeble attempt to knot his tie, and it dangled, half-undone, around the open collar of his shirt.

"Please come this way Mr. Hartmann," he said. "My office is just along here. There's some fresh coffee ready."
We passed through a very tastefully decorated reception area with leather sofas and glass coffee tables. One could easily have mistaken it for the lobby of a luxury hotel. A couple holding hands glanced up at us as we passed by. Whether they were patients or visitors I could not tell. Indeed, from what I knew of the intake, such a distinction seemed trivial anyway. The allegations levelled against this place by the faded television celebrity who had briefly been a patient here appeared fantastic and outlandish. It is a sad fact, and one that the public may not wish to face, but often those

patients who are the worst abused are those least likely to report it. I have known instances take place in closed, secure units where the staff has beaten, raped and even tortured the insane. Not merely randomly, but on a systematic basis. There is no protection for the vulnerable from human cruelty. But as I was to learn, the situation at the Glanville Home was another matter altogether, one that cannot be considered as normal or subject to any of the codes of psychiatric care.

The celebrity, one Catherine Wakefield, a former soap-opera star, had arrived at the Home a month earlier in June. She had admitted herself and after a brief examination by a Dr. Rillington was diagnosed as suffering from underlying depression. It was arranged for her to attend a course of group therapy sessions, primarily cognitive behavioural, and to begin taking Paroxetine immediately. Thereafter, she had been treated with the same courtesy, care and attention as the other patients. She attended the sessions, took her medication and was discharged after two months.

I gathered all this information from Dr. Arnold as I sat in his ground floor office drinking fresh coffee.

“Why was she discharged so early? Did she make rapid progress?” I asked him as I leafed through her case file on the desk between us.

“No. The fact is that she was suffering from a delusion.”

“What exactly?”

“She had the idea that we had one inmate whom we had kept in solitary for our own sinister purposes. The other patients felt that she was spying on them, trying to find out whom this non-existent person was. Her antics seriously affected the smooth running of the Home.”

“And these people pay a lot of money for a completely placid existence, doctor?”

“Quite right.”

I was inclined to agree with his interpretation. Wakefield was undoubtedly a publicity seeker. Looking through her file verified the impression I’d made of her personality. In this place, more of a rest home than anything else, I could see that any friction was to be avoided.

Arnold lit up a cigarette and greedily sucked the smoke into his lungs.

“Do you?” he said, waving the packet in my direction.

“I don’t,” I replied forcibly and looking to my left couldn’t help but let my gaze rest on the enamel “No Smoking” sign facing me on the edge of his desk. Perhaps he had put it there as a joke at his own expense. But it

seemed strange.
“I’d like to talk to some of your patients if I may, doctor,” I said, though I meant it as more of a statement of intent than a request. I downed the last of the coffee as if to reinforce matters.
Arnold pressed an intercom button and asked a nurse called Ellis to enter.
“Will you show Mr Hartmann around our establishment nurse Ellis?” he told the rather plain, middle-aged woman with greasy hair whom he’d summoned.
“Certainly,” She responded and as I got to my feet I saw the doctor pass his half-smoked cigarette to her in an absurdly surreptitious fashion.
Immediately I sensed something was very wrong. Either this was some kind of practical joke and one entirely inappropriate to the circumstances, or the two were impostors.
Nurse Ellis stood there looking at me blankly, with the cigarette dangling from her lips.
“This way,” she finally said after a pause of several seconds.
I followed the woman down a long carpeted corridor and was shown into the patients’ recreation room. It had panelled walls and sumptuous leather sofas. Several persons were lounging around in various degrees of lethargy. The majority of them had not bothered to dress properly, being clad only in their underwear or in pyjamas and dressing gowns. Mounted on the far wall was a very large television that they were all watching. The faces of each betrayed signs of exhaustion.
These people did not seem like the idle rich suffering from minor mental disorders. Despite the opulence of the surroundings, they seemed to be on the verge of catatonia. I wanted to see what they found so riveting on the television and I wandered in front of the screen.
Nurse Ellis took advantage of my distraction and plunged a syringe into my neck.
I lost consciousness within seconds.

Ж

I awoke to find myself in the same recreation room, slumped in one of the comfortable leather chairs and dressed only in shorts and a vest. There was

no way of knowing how many hours had passed, but the darkness beyond the windows told me that it was now evening.

When I tried to move I discovered that my body was entirely numb and paralytic from the neck down. Panic took hold of me and I wildly cast my gaze around the room. I tried to scream but a muted croak was the only sound to issue from my throat. Several patients were also slumped in the chairs and their attention was fixed on the television screen. They appeared to be hypnotised by it.

The picture was fuzzy with static and distorted as if being broadcast from a great distance. I saw a doubled-up and emaciated man rocking moronically. His back was to the camera and his head lolled around from side to side. He had been locked in a padded cell with only the sound of his mirthless chuckling for company. Numerous heavy scars were visible through his closely shaven white hair. They criss-crossed the back of his skull and neck. It looked as if he were sewing something very near to his eyes: perhaps needlecraft that required minute examination. But, in any case, one could not quite make out exactly what it was.

The inmates watching the screen appeared to be waiting for him to finish his task and turn around, so that they could see his face. Or maybe they were waiting for him to stop chuckling horribly and start speaking.

I was left with the others to stare at the screen for hours. The only interval that occurred was when Nurse Ellis made her rounds and administered another dose of paralysing fluid to me, and the initial hope I had felt when sensation began to return to my limbs was swiftly dashed.

I had a long time in which to speculate about the whereabouts and identity of the madman on the television screen. Naturally my first thought was that he was an inmate in the Glanville Home, and yet the fact that this place seemed to have no secure cells argued against it. As did the sense that we were watching a weak transmission from a great distance. There was just too much distortion and interference in the picture for it to be a CCTV transmission: it was more as if the signal was coming from the other side of the world.

Finally Nurse Ellis returned again, this time with two orderlies, and switched off the television. After a moment of disorientation, the inmates crept out of their sofas and stumbled away to their rooms. Their vigil was over. Meanwhile, the orderlies carried me off to a room of my own, where I fell into a deep and dream-riddled sleep.

Ж

When I awoke it was to discover that I was once more in front of the television screen in my familiar chair. My limbs were still unresponsive, though if I put enough will power into the effort I discovered that I was able to cause a slight tremor in the fingers of my right hand.

No one would miss me for a long while. Before I'd left my office I'd made my doubts about the validity of the charge against the Glanville Home known to my colleagues. Moreover, they'd assume that I would be fishing in Scotland by this time, on my annual month's leave. I couldn't help but fear that Dr Arnold was making arrangements for my *permanent* disappearance.

Why had Arnold, Ellis and their cohorts taken such extreme measures to remove any threat from me? How did it relate to the person on the television screen whose every twitch was followed by the inmates with rapt attention? The inmates here were not supposed to be in a state of extreme psychiatric peril. They were the wealthy; afflicted by minor mental disturbances that rest and recuperation in pleasant surroundings should ameliorate. Nothing made sense. Was it simply the case that everyone in the Glanville Home had gone collectively mad at some point: doctors, nurse and staff, as well as the inmates themselves? Ж

On the fifth day of my incarceration the paralytic agent used on me seemed to have been diluted. I found that, with an immense effort, I could stand and totter forward a few steps. I could now even speak normally, though I was cautious in exercising this faculty. Strangely, I had no desire to wander far though: I had not anticipated how much the sight of the man on the television screen had come to utterly fascinate me. He was surely the key to the mystery. The sense of anticipation that I shared with my fellow inmates centred on the idea that he was on the verge of revealing a great secret. We would nod at each other over each small movement that he made; as if it was a code that only we might understand. I was sure that I noticed a pattern in his horrible laughter, tiny changes in volume and pitch that indicated a language all of its own like whale songs. More than anything I believe that we longed to see his face, for him to turn that scarred and

closely shaven skull towards us and acknowledge our existence.

Ж

On the seventh day I awoke to find that I was not slumped in my usual chair in front of the television in the recreation room. Instead, I had been left in the room upstairs where I slept. Looking at the clock I saw that it was half past ten in the morning. The door had been left open. I tested my limbs and was astonished that they again responded effortlessly to my commands. No drugs had been used on me for over twenty-four hours. Cautiously, I glanced along the corridor just outside the door. It was empty.

Escape from the Glanville Home would be simplicity itself. There were no security features of any kind to impede me. Only the high wall surrounding the estate would prove to be an obstacle but I was confident of finding a tree I could climb and a thick branch I could shin along and drop from to the ground outside.

I descended the lushly carpeted stairs to the foyer, taking care to keep close to the corners, so as not to be seen from below. But I need not have worried, as it was deserted. The glass doors that led to the outside were open, admitting a cool breeze that was pleasant in the uncomfortable summer heat.

And then I heard the sound that was my undoing: the familiar sound of mirthless chuckling. It came from the television room to my left.

I looked again at the open doors and saw the lawn stretching away outside the building, lush and green and freshly mown. It was covered in sunshine. Unaccountably, I found that I was not walking towards it but was drawn instead towards this sound to my left. As I entered the darkened television room a few heads turned towards me and one or two inmates waved in welcome. Their excited faces were coloured by the blue grainy static of the television screen. I tried not to, but was unable to resist taking my place in my usual chair so that I too could observe the scarred, skinhead man.

The vision of that freshly mown lawn lingered for a time in my mind, but after a while my attention was thoroughly taken up with the rocking and muffled laughing of he whom we were told to refer to as “Patient 704”.

Ж

Thereafter, once I had conquered my desire to leave, I was no longer given any medication. I came and went at will, although, invariably, my primary destination was the television room where I could observe the activities of Patient 704 with my fellow inmates. The discussions that I now had with them were of supreme interest and we speculated endlessly on the message that he was undoubtedly trying to pass to us. That there was a pattern in his mirthless laughter, in its rise and fall, tone and volume, I no longer doubted. Once the inmates had accepted me, some of them had confessed that they too shared my interpretation. A patient called Hector harboured especially wild theories and had been known to talk of the “the space left behind by the contraction of omniscience.”

And what of the scars? What significance did they hold in the scheme of things? Had someone else beaten him around the head or were the wounds self-inflicted? Why was the act of sewing so important to him? Where was his cell located? Some of the inmates were convinced that it was inside our own heads, projected into the television by thought, whilst others held that it was a real place being filmed by CCTV cameras within the Glanville Home. Others said that it didn’t matter: that the symbol was more important than its origin or physical reality. Ж

Dr Arnold would check on my progress every so often and even advised me that Catherine Wakefield had publicly retracted her allegations.

“In fact,” Arnold said, pointing across the recreation room, “Miss Wakefield has rejoined our ranks.”

A bleached blonde woman in her middle forties smiled at me and revealed the dozens of lines and cracks on her face, despite the thick make-up she wore.

I could not be sure whether Dr Arnold was enjoying a joke at my own expense. Often I had the impression that he regularly changed his appearance, and would slip from one body to another as his fancy took him. The man who stood beside me at this point was not the one I remembered from my arrival at the Glanville Home, but was instead a man in his late fifties, bald, overweight and with horn-rimmed spectacles. It was only the white coat and the metal name badge that identified him.

Ж

The other inmates seemed more willing to communicate with me, as it became obvious that I too was intent on matching their devotion to Patient 704. I was still curious about just how his acolytes had been brought together in one place, and how this place had changed from being a rest home into a centre of worship.
Hector, the greasy little man who frequently sat behind me in the recreation room, advised me that: “the old patients got changed.”
“But what about the staff?” I asked him.
“There are no staff here anymore. We look after ourselves, you see? There isn’t even any you or me for very long.”
So my supposition that everyone who was confined here was insane now seemed a certainty.
Suddenly, Patient 704 grabbed at his shaven skull as if afflicted with agonising pain and he uttered a strangely muffled shriek. His body rocked back and forth violently.

Ж

That evening, after I got back to my room, I splashed some cold water on my head to remove the sweat caused by the day’s devotions. Looking into the mirror above the basin I saw a strange face looking back at me. It was Dr Arnold’s, as it had appeared when first I’d met him on the steps outside the Glanville Home. And I remembered what Hector told me.
When I slept, I dreamt of a beautiful green lawn that seemed always to recede despite my attempts to reach it.

Ж

I awoke suddenly in the middle of the night and went straight to the bathroom mirror to check on my appearance. This time I had the face of Hector. The fact did not terrify me in the slightest, but with a calm and level

manner I went to find him so that I might apologise for the mistake. However this proved a more laborious task than I had anticipated, because I had no idea whose face Hector was now wearing and so I had no way of recognising him. After I had wandered around the dark and empty corridors for a while I gave up and went to the television room. I saw the blue glow of the screen and was astonished that a nightbroadcast of Patient 704 was in progress. Such a thing was unheard of.

Just as I was about to enter I felt a tapping on my shoulder. I turned around and saw that it was, or appeared to be, Catherine Wakefield. She was grinning. For some reason she'd not bothered with make-up this morning or even donned the blonde wig she usually wore. Her real hair was thin, grey and straggly, like cobwebs.

"What is it," I responded irritably, "can't you see that the programme has already begun?"

"It's me … Hector," And his voice came out of the faded female celebrity's mouth, as the two of us entered the television room.

Several other inmates made ssshing noises as Nurse Ellis beckoned us inside.

"Sit down quickly," her almost-disembodied voice told us. "You're late for the final broadcast."

Everyone shuffled silently into the recreation room and took their seats.

Ж

We sat there transfixed, watching the distorted and static ridden picture on the television screen. For a long time Patient 704 did nothing out of the ordinary. He rocked back and forth like an idiot, emitting a low droning moan. We had experienced this a dozen times before. And then he did something unusual.

At last he got to his feet.

And he turned to face the camera.

But the scarred and mutilated thing we saw had torn out its own eyes and sewn shut its mouth.

Ж

The last thing I remember is being on the lawn gazing upwards at the moonlight with all the other inmates. We wandered around aimlessly until sunrise, when the noise of sirens heralded the ambulances that took us to other places.

They say that there is no such person as Patient 704 and that Dr. Arnold experimented on us with psycho-pharmaceuticals he had synthesised himself. They say that the television was tuned *in between* stations and only showed meaningless static. They tell me that when they finally allow me to look at a television screen I will not see Patient 704 and his stitched and eyeless face.

But I do not believe them.

# SHALLABALLAH

A WIG COVERED his bald scalp. His face was a patchwork of skin joined together by ugly black stitches. Mr Punch told him that, given time, the resulting scars would be scarcely noticeable. Eventually they would almost fade away and leave only thin lines that could not be seen except under an extremely bright light. But as Sogol examined his own features in the mirror, tracing his fingers over the threads that held the flesh together, he found it difficult to believe that what he saw would ever again resemble his old familiar face. His reflection was like a mask, dead and expressionless. Sogol tried to remember that Mr Punch had told him this was to be expected and that nerve-to-muscle control would take a few days to return, yet he had not really been prepared for the reality of just how ghastly he would appear in the interim. He poked a fingernail into the skin but felt nothing. It was like touching another person.

*A gigantic industrial estate with narrow walkways, corridors and alleys. The squat, square buildings are made of concrete. They are rundown and dismal. Many of the windows are broken. On the flat roofs there are crooked TV aerials and grimy satellite dishes. They look like bizarre scarecrows and are framed against an orange-coloured sky. Subsidence and age has made the structures lean together. Flights of twisted stairs link one level to another.*

Sogol sat on the edge of the camp-bed. Its mattress was soiled and hollowed in the centre, a reminder of all those who had been here before him. Mr Punch's "clinic" offered the most meagre hospitality, despite the exorbitant cost of his special type of treatment. Those who went under his knife did so in the knowledge that the gentleman was a criminal, possibly even insane. But still his patients came. There was nowhere else for them to go. This horrible little building with its dusty windows and peeling paintwork, hidden away in a run-down ghetto estate, was a recondite Lourdes where one offered up hard cash in exchange for miracles.

He'd heard rumours about the celebrities that had passed through here. Film actresses who, beyond the help of lighting and make-up, even of face-lifts or plastic surgery, had extended their shelf-life by more than a decade by utilising the services of Mr Punch. One did not approach him. There was no way to contact him. Mr Punch would call on the telephone offering his services to those he knew were most in need. Celebrities of course. Only ever celebrities who could afford the fees he charged. And then his black ambulance would call in secret at an appointed time.

In Sogol's case it was after the car accident. The TV company had paid a lot of money to hush the thing up. This was, after all, right in the middle of filming the episode that was going to be next year's ratings triumph. Only Mr Punch could repair the damage that Sogol had suffered in the crash; only Mr Punch could reconstruct his monstrously burnt face in time.

Sogol coked up to the eyeballs, driving a sports car, a bottle of scotch with just a dribble left in it lying beside him on the passenger seat, and a hairpin bend on the hillside road…leaving behind some woman… who meant nothing to him…

Three days ago. Strange to think it had only been less than a week.

*The interiors of the dismal buildings are not homes. They contain no dwellings. Inside one would find a series of strange rooms cluttered with all manner of what appears to be junk: pot plants, framed pictures, coat stands, mounds of clothes and painted backdrops.*

"You cannot leave," Mr Punch had told him in a letter passed to Sogol, "until your treatment is complete. You must follow my instructions in each and every detail. If you fail to do so I cannot be held responsible for what might happen to your face."

Sogol had groaned at this statement and crumpled the letter in his hands. He was desperate to leave this anonymous ghetto in a town whose name he could not even recall. God knows in the past he had spent time in enough sleazy hotels in pursuit of fame, playing bit parts where he might be called to the set at any moment in order to wander in front of the cameras and utter a line or two of dialogue. But that was before he had struck it big, before his

face was known to everyone he met, before he'd graced the cover of gossip magazines, before interviews with him were sought by all the TV chat-show hosts.

But if he left now people would turn their heads in horror, not in awed recognition, as he passed them by. A man with a cracked face. A freak. A refugee from a sideshow who happened to bear a passing resemblance to a famous TV soap opera star.

Sogol, winner of three prestigious awards for best leading male role, one of the most highly paid actors on television, a man whom the public adored, a man who was witty, charming and handsome. Handsome above all, but now reduced to this intolerable, pitiful state of existence.

*There are dusty corridors within the structures of immense industrial estate. Faded TV schedules are pinned to the walls. The same programmes are broadcast at the same time day after day, night after night. The same films, the same episodes of soap operas, the same documentaries, the same panel games and quiz shows. In the photos accompanying the text all the celebrities wear fixed smiles. Their eyes are open too wide as if they regard the camera with fear.*

Sogol made his way along the passageway outside his room. At the end was the payphone that he was permitted to use. Mr Punch had banned mobile phones from his clinic. He confiscated them from patients as soon as they were admitted.

"No distractions," Mr Punch had explained, "no stress-inducing conversations. Complete rest. If you must make an urgent call, then there is a telephone available. Calls are monitored, however, for your own benefit. Unnecessary exploitation of this service will result in the connection being terminated and the privilege withdrawn."

Up in the corner of the middle of the passageway, in the angle between the far wall and the ceiling, was a surveillance camera. It moved through an arc on its wall-mount base in order to keep Sogol in its line of sight as he passed by. He cradled the receiver between his ear and shoulder, and dialled the number with his right hand as he scanned the little black phone book in

his left. Just then he felt the beginnings of a dull pain well up around his forehead and along his jaw-line. A sure sign that the nurse would soon be making her rounds with the drug trolley; strange that he was now marking time by the effects of painkillers wearing off.

"Ketch Entertainments." The sound of a bored, unfamiliar female voice came down the line.
Ketch *what*? Had Sogol heard her right?
"Put me through to Joey," he said through stiffened lips, "tell him it's Sogol."
There was a pause and some tinny muzak played as his call was transferred. After a few seconds Joey picked up.
"Hi Joey, it's me," he blurted out.
"Sogol? Where the bloody hell are you?"
*What was his problem?*
"Where do you think I am you idiot? Still in the clinic of course."
"What clinic? Why haven't you phoned in? I've gone half-crazy sorting out the seaside shows that have had to be cancelled. You've lost us a lot of money. If you think you're still represented by this agency think again."
*Had Joey lost his mind? What was this? His idea of a joke?*
"I'm having my face reconstructed here and you're acting like an arsehole…" Sogol hissed through his teeth, but in mid-sentence the line went dead. There was a loud click and then a droning, recorded voice said:
"This call is terminated. Please return to your room at once."
Sogol replaced the receiver and then tried to dial again. However before he'd even completed entering the whole telephone number, he heard the same recorded instruction.
"This call is terminated. Please return to your room at once."
Sogol looked back over his shoulder. The surveillance camera was trained on him. Right now someone was doubtless watching him on one of the pictures from a bank of CCTV screens. Watching and waiting to see whether he would comply. I'm not being treated like some nobody, Sogol thought, I'm not standing for this anymore. I'm Sogol! I'm not in prison!
Just then a set of double doors at the end of the corridor opened and two huge men clad in three-quarter length black coats and bowler hats strode purposefully towards him. They looked like undertakers rather than orderlies. Nevertheless, rather than displaying any sign of his being

intimidated, Sogol advanced to meet the pair. But within moments, despite his screams of protest, his arms were pinned behind his back and he was frog-marched back along the corridor and thrown into his room. They locked the door behind them once they left. Neither of them had uttered a word to him but had been cold and silent going about their business of restraint and coercion in a mechanical, indifferent fashion. Had the situation required it, Sogol was sure that they would not have balked at actually beating him into submission.

*Within the structures with the twisted TV aerials on the roofs one can hear sounds. They echo along the corridors coated with peeling paintwork. There is laughter without any humour in it; shrill, cold laughter. And it is accompanied by a series of groans. The groans seem to come from weakened lungs and throats. When the groans falter there is a horrible tittering, like that of a demented child, and then they begin all over again. This goes on for hours and hours. Finally, the sounds are suddenly replaced by the dim hiss of static. This lasts for a few seconds and then the whole process repeats itself without cessation.*

Sogol was perched on the edge of the camp-bed waiting for someone to come and attend to him. He'd pushed the summons button over and over again but the nurse had not responded. Was he being punished for his actions? He knew that it was long past the time he was due his medication. The flesh beneath the skin of his face itched unbearably, as if it was infested with spectral bugs, and despite the consequences Sogol could not stop scratching. He felt nothing; the outer layers of his facial skin were as numb as before, but at least it brought some temporary relief further down. Perhaps the bugs stopped crawling when they were sure that he was still alive.

He'd taken off the wig and sat there staring at the shoddy thing as he turned it over repeatedly in his hands. It was made of rough, artificial fibres and the brown fake hair was held together by a mesh that rested next to the scalp when worn. Mr Punch had advised him that Sogol's own hair would begin to grow back within days but there was no sign of bristle on his skull, simply the same bald mottled patchwork he discovered when he'd awoken after the operation.

Up in the corner of the room was a fixture that he couldn't remember having seen previously. It was a dusty old light fitting with a bulb screwed into the socket. Underneath was a small rectangular panel that was covered in a thick layer of dust. Sogol got up to examine it more closely. He scraped away the debris to reveal the words "On Air" etched into its glass front. The bulb above the lettering was coloured a deep red.

Perhaps Mr Punch had it put there as a tribute to his patients, in recognition of their celebrity status. It was a weird thing to do since in every other detail he had made no similar gestures. How could he possibly consider this seedy flea-pit as suitable for the glitterati? What matter that such an absurd concession had been made when compared to the grubby cells and corridors, the lack of proper heating and basic facilities?

Outside, in the corridor, he could hear the sound of the nurse finally making her rounds with the drugs trolley. It rattled like a jar of nails as she slowly wheeled the thing along the uneven linoleum. Sogol banged ferociously on the door, in an attempt to attract her attention. He began shouting at the top of his voice that he demanded she see to him first and that he was suffering terrible pain.

"I'm next, you old bitch! I'm next! I'm dying in here!"

A grille in the door opened and through the latticework her thin, doll-like head hoved into view. The nurse wore an old-fashioned mobcap. She looked at him with small black eyes, devoid of emotion.

"Stagefright, eh? Stagefright?" The words came from a toothless hole ringed by a gaudy mess of smeared lipstick. Saliva oozed down out of it onto a flabby chin dotted with hairs. "Open wide, ugly. Open wide for Nurse Judy."

She thrust two green-coated pills through the interstices and dropped them. Sogol scrambled to the floor and then swallowed them eagerly. When he looked up, the grille was closed again and he heard her continuing her rounds, whistling a discordant melody.

After fifteen minutes had passed the two grim-faced orderlies entered his room, picked Sogol up from the floor and flung him onto the bed, strapping him down to it. They left the door open, on purpose it seemed, and he stared at the aperture with dry, unblinking eyes. There were moments when the uninterrupted light affecting his retina turned everything into a hazy fog of white blindness.

*There is an old television set dating from the 1930s or 40s. It is housed in a four-foot tall wooden cabinet with a ten-inch high flickering blue screen on the front. In a darkened, derelict room a shadowy figure with a patchwork face silently watches the display. The signal that the device is receiving is an image of a long out-of-date test card. In the centre of the image is a circle with vertical lines that thicken from right to left. Above the circle is a logo and a slogan:* SHALLABALLAH *and "Television is the New Afterlife." Outside the circle is a black space that fills the rest of the screen. Written in white lettering on the space are the following words:*

*Right: "Delayed images (ghosts) may appear on the black or white strips." Left: "Reception reports may be sent to Mr. Punch. College of Professors. Eng. Div., London N.19." Underneath: "Test Transmission".*

*Accompanying the visual broadcast is a monaural sound; a four frequency tone that ranges from a very low droning whine to a very high shrill pitch. It is played on a continuous loop. The individual watching and listening to the broadcast is humming to himself, and he eerily mimics the noise coming from the television set's speaker, as if hypnotised.*

Sogol heard footsteps and murmuring voices from outside in the corridor. It sounded like someone was conversing with the nurse and he was certain that he heard his name mentioned, though exactly what they were discussing was too indistinguishable to make out. When she came into the room she was carrying an old suitcase which she set down on the end of his bed. The nurse opened it, and took out items of stage make-up, foundation, powder and natural skin colourings, as well as a small set of scissors and tweezers. She began to cut and unpick his stitches from his skin. Once she'd finished she applied some of the make-up to his face, doing her best to mask his blemishes and wounds.

*A TV studio with a set designed to look like an operating theatre from the 1930s or 1940s. The cameras that the operators are using are as out-of-date as the mock surroundings. Each device requires not only someone to point the lens but also someone else to wheel it around at the base as it closes in on a shot. At the operating table are life-size Punch and Judy puppets in white smocks, masks and gloves. Their movements are stiff and awkward although Punch tries occasionally to caper. Judy passes surgical implements over to him as he tinkers with the exposed brain of a man whose skull has been sawn open. Punch makes incisions in the man's frontal lobe with a scalpel and inserts a series of wires into the holes. The wires are connected to an obsolete television set next to the operating table. The TV is switched on. During the operation a camera draws closer and on the screen next to the table the heavily made-up face of the man being operated on can be seen quite clearly, though the image is grainy and slightly distorted. His eyes are open. They move from side to side. Not once does he blink.*

*During the operation Punch and Judy quarrel with each other. Punch throws Judy to the floor and changes the channel on the TV set, moving a frequency dial until it's tuned into a station showing a programme in which the patient on the table is the star.*

Sogol wandered along the corridors outside his room. The effects of the drug had worn off some hours before although he still suffered from stiffness in his legs and back, making him walk with a shuffling gait, like that of an elderly man. It seemed that his treatment was over, for a note left in his room had advised him that he was to be released after a final interview and examination by Mr Punch.

He ran his fingers over the flesh of his face. It was almost totally smooth except for some very thin scar-lines and all the lost sensation and movement had now returned. As the CCTV cameras tracked Sogol's movement through the passageways, he could not resist turning his gaze upon them so that whoever was observing him could not help but see him more clearly. Once, he even flashed one of his best trademark smiles at the indifferent lens. The only thing that continued to trouble him was the damned wig. But he had to wear it in order to cover the fresh stitches that had been sewn all

the way around his head. Anyway, as soon as he was on the outside it would be easy enough to find a more sophisticated and comfortable hairpiece.

He passed through a set of double doors. Above the entrance Sogol saw a green sign that read “Studio 7”. He gazed around him with bemused astonishment at what he saw in the room. It was dusty and almost bare. At the far end stood a portable canvas booth, like those used for puppet theatre. However, where the stage opening should be there was instead a television screen. The device inside was switched on but the picture showed only a card with the words “An Announcement is Being Made in Sound” on a black background. The sound it emitted was a four-frequency tone, its pitch rising and falling. In the centre of the room a hangman’s noose dangled from the ceiling. Directly beneath it was a trapdoor, operated by a lever mechanism fixed onto the bare floorboards.

Then Punch and Judy appeared from behind him. They seized Sogol and although he struggled wildly, the two of them quickly had his hands bound behind his back with a length of cord. Mr Punch placed a noose over his neck and tightened the knot until the rope chafed his throat. Judy dragged his body by its legs into a standing position above the trapdoor. Neither of them spoke a word, maintaining a grim, terrifying silence. Mr Punch beat Sogol about his head viciously with a stick, until he stopped resisting.

When Sogol was in the right position, the test-card on the screen faded out although the four-frequency tone continued to be broadcast. The inky blackness slowly gave way to black and white static. Inside the chaos of the electronic snow features began to coalesce and take shape; a deformed maw that might have been a mouth and twin holes that might have been empty eye sockets.

Mr Punch covered Sogol’s head with a cloth bag. For some reason it had mouth and eye-holes cut into the rough material. Then the lever was pulled and Sogol’s flailing body dropped into the opening that appeared beneath him. He fell for fifteen feet before the rope reached its full length and the knot at the base of his skull snapped his neck.

Up in Studio 7 the face on the television screen in the booth continued to take shape. Its features became more distinct and more like those of Sogol

with each moment that passed.

# GHORLA

My contention is that high-level sentience collapses in on itself near death in a manner akin to the demise of a massive star and that dying thoughts approach infinite duration. Post-mortem, these thoughts, if driven by a will of sufficient power, can tumble over a synaptic event horizon and subsequently appear in another body with an almost exact genetic identity. Such “heirs” are subject to the invasion of their minds by ideas and emotions that originate with the dead. The living are simply vehicles for a series of disturbing and broken alien responses that we take to be our own personalities. I now believe that the majority of thoughts we think actually come from the "ghost shells” of ancestors in varying states of psychical decay. They are the products of disintegrating remains, frightful masks that have not been shed. Afterlife geography is seen in the UHF frequencies between TV channels, consisting of immense steppes of static. It is a projection in time, comprised of anti-matter and populated by the dead.

Julius Ghorla

*Black Holes* (1983)

THE BUS APPROACHED Crawborough railway station. It was a wet, miserable morning in late October. The rain had not ceased for three days and the weather forecasts predicted another week more of it. All the holidaymakers were long gone from this stretch of the Yorkshire coast; no more backpackers, elderly couples, or dirty weekenders used the bus service to ferry them north. Most of the time, except during school-run hours, the vehicle was empty save for one or two lone shoppers ferrying their heavy bags back from the supermarket to home. Even they usually travelled only as far as four or five stops.

The driver of the bus, one Bill Jones, was confident he would not have to take on any passengers for this service from Crawborough to Banwick. The incessant rain seemed to have forced everyone off the streets. This pleased

him quite a bit because it meant he could enjoy the luxury of smoking whilst he drove, instead of waiting until he reached the depot at Banwick, well over an hour away. There would be no-one to comment on his flouting the bus company's regulations.

But as he pulled into the turn near the railway station he was disgruntled to see a lone figure waiting underneath the bus-shelter ahead. The prospective passenger had a large suitcase with him, two plastic carrier-bags and a wicker-basket for carrying a small dog or large cat.

When he pulled up alongside the shelter and opened the doors Jones saw that the man was glancing accusingly at a fob watch he'd produced from the left pocket of his shabby beige mackintosh.

The man immediately struck Jones as being a difficult passenger. He tut-tutted loudly as he put away the fob watch as if to insinuate that the bus was running late. Moreover, his appearance and demeanour gave the overall impression that he fancied himself as an eccentric. This did not endear him to Jones who regarded any person even remotely out of the ordinary as highly suspicious; perhaps even of having come up from London. The passenger wore a black pork pie hat and sported a polkadotted bow tie. He looked to be in his middle fifties. His thin face was a network of worry lines as if he had analysed all the problems of the world and come to no solution for them. His complexion was sallow, like candle-wax, particularly around his cheeks. He had a long, aquiline nose, beady little eyes and a small chin as smooth as a billiard ball.

The passenger began to haul his luggage up into the bus and crammed it in the storage space just in front of the seats on the left-hand side of the aisle. Jones noticed that the two carrier bags were stuffed full of paperback books. They smelt musty with age. When the passenger turned back to collect the wicker basket, which had been left until last, Jones called out in a flash of spiteful inspiration:

“Hurry along there, you're holding up the bus.”

The man glared back coolly and then, with an air of studied irony, began to look around him, making it perfectly aware that he knew he was the only

passenger boarding at this stop.

“My good fellow,” he replied in a wearied tone, “kindly refrain from being objectionable.” His accent was very Received Pronunciation, the type of voice passed down by generations of BBC broadcasters until regional accents were finally ushered in.

After he'd paid his fare, the passenger, whose name was Arthur Staines, carried the wicker basket with him to a seat close to the back of the bus. He wanted to be as far away as possible from the oafish driver. From inside the basket there came a long meowing noise and Staines lifted the lid to allow his cat Edgar to examine their surroundings. The creature, a fat and bad-tempered beast with mangy black fur, poked its head out and looked around with evident distaste. The cat lent one paw against the edge of the basket and dug its claws into the side. Staines feared that it might, at any moment, waddle forward and attempt to attack the driver, so he persuaded Edgar to settle down again before it was too late.

Edgar was Staines' sole companion. The two had been together for over ten years. Once the cat had reached maturity it decided not only that it preferred never to be left alone but also that it was no longer prepared to walk anywhere at all. Occasionally it would drag itself from one side of a room to another in order to eat or defecate, but its great bulk now meant that even this concession was haphazard.

Outside, the rain lashed across the landscape of rolling fields and hills. Staines gazed absently at the deluge, more interested in the streams of water coursing down the glass of the bus windows than in the vistas cloaked by the low grey clouds. The vehicle crept along narrow roads between towns and along the sides of valleys, throwing up gigantic splashes as it motored through puddles and pools that had formed on the route.

He took a map from the breast pocket of his shabby mackintosh, unfolded it, and spread it out across his knees. His destination was an old fishing village called Scarsdale Bay, not far south from Banwick. Staines had carefully circled the coastal town on the map.

For some time he had been engaged upon research concerned with an obscure author who had made the village his home during his latter years. This writer, Julius Ghorla (1930-1985), had scraped a living writing pulp novels. Staines planned to make Ghorla the exclusive subject of the next instalment (the third) of his limited-circulation periodical *Proceedings of the Dead Authors Society*.

Staines was one of those obsessive bibliophiles who were unable to take any interest in fiction unless its creator had long been in the tomb. Had Ghorla been alive and still writing today it was certain that Staines would have thought his work insignificant. Moreover, Staines even ignored prestigious dead authors, reserving his praise for those sufficiently obscure to have escaped critical attention almost altogether. It was as if by championing those writers who had been unfairly overlooked, and who were safely dead, he might thereby obtain for himself some measure of the reputation they had been denied. Vanity had turned him into a ghoul of letters. Ghorla's books had appeared only during the boom in cheap glue-bound paperbacks, never seeing print in hardcover, and issued solely by Eclipse Publications Ltd, an imprint of a disreputable firm whose catalogue otherwise consisted of risqué or “spicy” novels.

Staines calculated that it could not be more than a 45-minute journey from Crawborough to Scarsdale Bay, despite the tortuous route that this particular local bus service followed. He had travelled all over the country in search of recondite literary discoveries, indulging his own predilections, although he made his actual, meagre living from what little freelance journalism he could sell to local newspapers and the likes of specialist glossy monthly magazines such as the Paranormal and UFO Times.

Julius Ghorla had been a favourite writer of his ever since he'd stumbled across a tattered paperback copy of the author's best known (inasmuch as “best known” is applicable) and final work back in 1984. The book was Ghorla's episodic-novel *Black Holes*, a series of short stories joined together to form a reasonably lengthy opus of some fifty thousand words. These stories were concerned with the interior experiences of the dying brains of several characters. Ghorla had come up with the intriguing idea that

consciousness slows down at the point of death to a degree whereby interior time bears no relation to the passage of time in external reality.

Edgar began to meow again. The cat was in state of some agitation and showed his displeasure by rocking back and forth inside his wicker basket. Staines was momentarily at a loss to account for the cause, until he caught a faint whiff of what appeared to be cigarette smoke. He looked up towards the front of the bus and there saw a wispy curl of blue tobacco vapour float out of the driver's cabin.

Staines was not especially puritanical himself when it came to smoking, but the effect it had on Edgar was not to be ignored. He got up from his seat and wandered forwards hoping to catch the driver in the act. However, by the time he was staring through the glass partition at him there was no trace of the offending cigarette. The driver's window was slightly open and it looked as if he had managed to flick the butt outside moments before Staines' investigation.

“Have you been smoking in here?” Staines said, whilst tapping on the partition.
“What?” He responded, as if he didn't understand the question. There were telltale traces of ash on the sleeve of his uniform.
“I shall report you,” Staines continued, “you have greatly upset my cat with your thoughtlessness.”
“If you don't get back in your seat and shut up,” the driver replied, raising his voice, “I'll throw you and your bloody cat off the bus.”
Staines took a quick look at the still-raging downpour outside. It really would not do to have to walk the seven or so miles remaining before they reached Scarsdale Bay, especially in this foul weather. He doubted that Edgar would survive such a trauma. Loud caterwauling emanated from within the wicker basket. Doubtless Edgar wondered where Staines had gone.

Ж

At the top of Scarsdale Bay, Staines stepped down from the bus, and joined

the luggage he'd deposited on the pavement. He heard the driver mutter something obscene as the doors closed.
The rain had eased and was now no more than persistent drizzle. Staines looked back and forth along the deserted lane until he spotted a sign indicating that Scarsdale Bay town centre was to his right, down a turning. As yet he could not see his destination but supposed it could only be a few minutes walk downhill. He tied the carrier bags of books around the outside of his suitcase. It had a retractable handle and little wheels at the base so that he could haul it along after him relatively easily. In his other hand he carried the basket containing Edgar. Mercifully the cat seemed to have fallen asleep after the excitement of the bus journey.
Once he'd turned the corner he had his first sight of Scarsdale Bay. It was situated on the side of a steep cliff and he saw a jumbled panorama of red-tiled rooftops and chimney-stacks. Cottages jostled one another over the warren of tiny and narrow stairways and lanes. It had doubtless been a haven for smugglers a few centuries ago. Staines made his way down the central street, Ormsley Parade, passing a series of overhanging upper storeys, dilapidated arches and little flights of steps for pedestrians that were designed to break up the extremely steep gradient. Really, thought Staines, this curious little place might have been designed by an admirer of the artist Piranesi. It was certainly a fitting town for Julius Ghorla to have chosen as a retreat in order to pen his outré series of tales.
A sea wall had been erected in the 1950s near the bottom of the village to prevent any more of the fishermen's cottages being washed away by waves during storms. Only Ormsley Parade wound all the way to the very bottom of the cliff. During high tide the waves lapped halfway up the cobbled and seaweed-coated steps leading to the beach. When the sea was rough Staines could easily imagine that it spilled over the steps and into the Parade in a foaming torrent.
The hotel in which Staines had booked a room loomed large to his left. It was the sole guest house in Scarsdale Bay. Although most of the cottages here were let out to tourists during the summer season, such an expense was beyond his limited means. This hotel, called Shadwell Vistas, was very cheap, especially at this time of year, and he anticipated that he was unlikely to be bothered by any other guests. He paused outside the building, looking up at the timbered mock-Tudor structure with its bull's-eye windows, and then made his way inside to the reception area via a set of

panelled double doors.
He crossed a threadbare carpet. The room had a sofa, a few chairs and some black and white photographs in frames by way of decoration. They depicted scenes of Scarsdale Bay taken during Victorian times. From another room close by he heard a discordant conversation punctuated by bursts of static that sounded as if it were coming from a television set. There was no-one manning the reception desk and so Staines rang the bell to signal his presence. A miserable looking man in his early sixties emerged from a back-office. He'd doubtless been engrossed in watching the television that Staines had heard. He was bald with a thin Orwellian moustache, and wore an undone waistcoat with check trousers. Staines noticed that he wasn't wearing any shoes, or even socks.
“Can I help you Sir?” The man said without enthusiasm.
“I made a reservation by telephone. The name's Arthur Staines.”
The man appeared to consult a list that he kept beneath the desk.
“Single room, staying for a week? Non-smoking?”
“Yes, that's it. Thirty-five pounds a night was the figure I was quoted.”
“I have the booking here Mr. Staines. Quite correct. By the way, I'm Charles Browning, the acting-Manager here during the off-season. Anything I can do for you please don't hesitate to ask.”
Staines signed the register, was told breakfast was served between seven and nine in the morning, and then was given a key with the number seven tagged onto it. Just as he began to climb the stairs with his luggage, the man came around the desk and caught him up.
“Oh. Forgot to tell you, Mr. Staines,” Browning said, “that there's a letter here for you. It was delivered yesterday.”
Staines looked bewildered. He wasn't expecting any letter. Perhaps it was from a correspondent, one of those who shared his enthusiasm for Julius Ghorla's work, with late information concerning the village. He stuffed the envelope into his pocket, nodded at Browning and continued up the stairs. When he reached the landing on the first floor he noticed that all the doors had bolts on the outside in addition to the standard inside locks.

Ж

Edgar was peering out of the basket and refused to leave it; he seemed decidedly unhappy about his surroundings. The hotel room was shabby and tiny. The mattress on the bed had been thinned by the weight of hundreds of guests. Staines imagined that someone deranged had chosen the wallpaper; it was a confused jumble of red whorls and spirals on a garish yellow background. He was glad it was so old that the colours had faded. When new it would have driven anyone mad.
He'd unpacked his belongings and now turned his attention to the letter. His name and the address of the hotel had been typed on the envelope, so he had no clue as to the sender. Even the post-mark was smudged, so its point of origin could not be determined.
He tore open the envelope and recognised the handwriting at once; a numbing sense of dread rose up from his guts as he read the abrupt missive:

*Heard about your good fortune in discovering that Ghorla's hitherto unknown sister is living in Scarsdale Bay. Will join you as quickly as possible. Do nothing until my arrival!*

*Yours etc., Eric*

Staines crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it across the room. That blasted Eric Cooper! Always dogging his footsteps! Cooper, like Staines, was obsessed with Julius Ghorla and was conducting his own research into the writer's life and work. By the weekend he too would be in Scarsdale Bay, pestering Staines to share what information he had gathered and then taking credit himself for what discoveries were previously made. Well, thought Staines, this particular act of treachery would not succeed. He had the head-start and resolved to press his advantage. By tomorrow he was determined to find and interview Ghorla's sister. Moreover, he would warn her in no uncertain terms to have nothing to do with Eric Cooper. By the time his adversary arrived he would be too late.

Edgar purred from his basket. It seemed that he'd finally become accustomed to his surroundings and it was time to feed him his evening meal; three tins of Swedish meatballs in tomato sauce. He opened the cans with the Swiss Army knife that he always carried with him. The cat shied

away at first sight of the implement, and became calm only when it was returned to Staines' jacket pocket.

Ж

Breakfast at the hotel consisted of a plateful of fried sausages, bacon, mushrooms, eggs and bread. Staines managed to eat around a quarter of it washed down with greasy tea, and fed the rest to Edgar who was lurking in his basket underneath the table.

The dining room was deserted except for Staines. He'd been right in assuming that there would be few, if any, other guests staying at the hotel. Mr. Browning appeared periodically to see whether Staines required anything further. Staines wondered whether the man did all the work in the hotel during the off-season. It seemed plausible.

When Browning returned to take away the crockery and cutlery, Staines asked him whether he knew anything of a “Miss Ghorla” and where she lived. The town was so small and had so few permanent residents that it seemed inconceivable he would not know of her.

“Oh yes,” Browning responded to Staines' query with a wry smile. “I know about her. Everyone here does. She's quite a local celebrity.”
He said nothing more on the subject but wrote down her address and directions to the place on a table napkin. Her cottage was located about three-quarters of the way up the cliff in a cul-de-sac.
“One more thing,” Staines said. “Why the bolts on the outside of the guest-room doors?”
“Oh that,” Browning replied, “was just a mistake. We never use them. They should have been fitted on the inside—you know how it is. We just haven’t got around to removing them yet.”

Ж

Within twenty minutes of Staines finishing breakfast he was traversing the

labyrinthine series of stairways, raised pavements and house-to-house archways in search of the cottage. He finally found a cobbled little turning, terminating in a high brick wall, where her home was located.
Staines knocked on the door three times and waited. In one hand he had a carrier-bag of books by her late brother, so as to prove his credentials as a scholar of his work, and in the other he carried the ubiquitous basket containing his cat. He'd covered the top of the basket with a sheet of plastic so that Edgar didn't get wet. The rain, though less ferocious at times than yesterday, was nevertheless still persistent.
The door finally swung open and the sight of one of the strangest women he had ever seen confronted Staines. The thing that struck him at first was the uncanny Ghorla family resemblance. He recalled a photograph he'd once seen of Franz Kafka with his younger sister Ottla; the two might have been twins. The case of Julius and Claudia Ghorla was much the same. Yet the appearance of the woman was remarkable in itself; and this was the judgement of a man who prided himself on being regarded by others as an eccentric in his own dress. Claudia Ghorla wore a blonde wig with a long fringe, a carefully sculpted coiffure in the 1950s beehive style. She could not have been any younger than seventy years of age. Her face was pinched and withered, and she wore an obscene amount of foundation, rouge and lipstick. Her blue eyes, almost hooded by false lashes, peered at Staines with contemptuous disinterest. The woman was emaciated. The off-black velvet dress she wore hung from her skeletal body as if displayed on a clothes hanger in the window display of a run-down charity shop.
She looked him up and down.
"I don't want to buy anything," she said in a throaty voice. "Now go away you awful little man."
Staines was taken aback at the idea anyone might mistake him for a travelling salesman or hawker of any description.
"Madam," he said, raising the cultivation of his accent several degrees by way of emphasis, "you misunderstand my motives in coming here."
"Nor," she replied, adopting a tone of hauteur even more cutting than her last effort, "do I wish to be bothered by—ugh—journalists."
This second assault was harder to bear, since it possessed an element of truth. Nevertheless Staines tried to shrug it off. He had not come this far to fall at the last. Not with Eric Cooper coming up along the rails close behind him.

Edgar let out a loud meow from inside the basket. He had endured quite enough of being outside in the damp air and alerted Staines to the fact.
“What's that you've got in there?” She said, her expression changing from one of stony hostility to one of interest.
“It's my cat Edgar. I take him with me wherever I go ... ”
“You drag a poor animal around in this foul weather? Bring him inside where it's dry you wretched man, before you kill the helpless creature!”

Ж

Staines had been trying unsuccessfully for over three hours to elicit information from Claudia Ghorla about her brother. The stick-like woman fussed around Edgar, making the cat the centre of her attention and practically ignoring whatever questions Staines asked that related directly to the author's life and work. It was as if she'd forgotten all about the existence of her late brother.
Staines sat in an armchair in her small drawing room, sipping at a cup of lukewarm tea. On the carpet were piled the paperback editions of Julius Ghorla's fiction. They failed to arouse any curiosity in her. When advised that Staines was planning a special issue of his little periodical *Proceedings of the Dead Authors Society* in her brother's honour she'd taken the news with no more than a shrug of non-committal. She was fanatically neutral about it all. He mentioned how unscrupulous his rival, Eric Cooper, could be, but she took the news calmly. Even Staines' claim that Cooper would rifle through drawers and cupboards in search of papers the moment her back was turned was met with nothing more than raised eyebrows.
He'd managed, at least, to convince her that he was not a journalist in search of a story, simply an amateur scholar engaged on private research for a small group of devotees. If he had not achieved this immediate aim he had no doubt that Claudia Ghorla would have taken no notice of him at all, except perhaps to contact the nearest branch of the RSPCA and have him reported for possible cruelty to his cat.
It had finally stopped raining and Staines suggested by way of a diversion that they might take a short walk while the weather was good. Ж
Although Staines was still anxious to turn the subject around to Claudia

Ghorla's brother she persisted in instead discussing whatever came into her mind.
They were sat upon an old bench overlooking the bay. It commanded a magnificent view of the jumbled house and cottage rooftops, the tangled alleyways and bridges. The turbulent waves crashed up against the sea-wall far below. It was high tide now and no trace of the weed-choked beach below could be seen. Behind the bench was the former cemetery, overrun by the expanse of woodland, its boundary walls mere ruins where exposed roots and twisted trunks had pushed their way through. The wind swept up from the bay and whistled past them.
“Quite a pleasant spot. The beauty of nature errm … and all that sort of thing,” Staines remarked, looking behind and then in front of him, comparing the two aspects of the scene around them. He said it to be polite. Frankly he was very much of the view that the countryside was something green-coloured that you travelled across in order to get from one city to another.
“The modern world ...” Miss Ghorla responded “… I find its sentimentality for Nature pathetic. Mother Nature! As if it concerns itself with the welfare of human-beings! Or, for that matter, with any other creatures. Nature is an idiot, a mindless force that fumbles across this black planet. And yet the stupid people worship it!”
“It's very inconvenient sometimes. Perhaps a little too wild ... ” Staines mumbled.
“When Nature acts in a way that is inimical to mankind, then we hear cries that hurricanes, floods and droughts are somehow unnatural! During one decade society claims we are on the brink of a new ice-age, during the next that global-warming will finish us all off! All this is the consequence of our worshipping Nature! We think of it as a mother, and cannot bear the idea that it has no regard whatsoever for us. We fret and wail looking for signs of her displeasure, convincing ourselves that we have wronged her, as if she ever cared – or even noticed – our existence in the first place.”
“I wonder if your brother shared your …” Staines said, before he was interrupted yet again.
“Plagues and cancer,” she spat. “Aren't these too a part of Nature? Yet we do not hesitate to try and eradicate them! Mother Nature is riddled with venereal disease!”
Edgar began to meow from inside the large wicker basket that Staines had

put down carefully next to the bench. The cat had also reached through the grille at the front and was clawing at the air in order to catch Staines' attention. The feline appeared to have had enough of Miss Ghorla's theories on mankind's attitude to the natural world.
The whole thing was a dead loss, thought Staines. The woman was useless to him. Let Eric Cooper see what he could do with her. Staines had endured enough of the old crone's nonsense.
“I really must be getting back to my hotel,” he said. “They serve dinner at six and I'm famished.”
“For a journalist, you've been quite entertaining,” she replied. “Here, take this. Look it over and I'll visit you this evening at your hotel around nine, once you've eaten. We can talk privately about my brother's theories then. Perhaps even try some of them out in practice.”
The old lady took a loose-leaf notebook from her handbag and passed it to the astonished Staines. He rifled through it as she got up, spoke a few more words and then turned away to vanish into the warren of streets below them.
“I've underlined some passages for your convenience that I think you'll find of particular interest.”
The notes related to Julius Ghorla's episodic-novel *Black Holes*. ЖК
Long after Claudia Ghorla had departed Staines could still be found sitting on the bench. He was poring over the notebook in a state of total fascination. It was only once it had got dark and become difficult to read that he noticed night had come. Edgar had fallen asleep; he'd given up trying to attract Staines' attention. Luckily the advent of a rising moon provided Staines with sufficient light to carry on reading the handwritten text without interruption. This might be his only chance to do so. The old lady was capricious and could well change her mind about providing him with further information later on.
Staines was surprised to find that Claudia Ghorla had added the following entries of her own towards the end of the notebook, having scored out her brother’s own pages with a black marker pen.

*12th July 1985*
*Well, it’s done. Last night I followed the instructions left by my late brother and drilled a hole in the front of my skull. It was an incredibly messy business. I really had no idea that there would be so much blood. The thick*

*strip of bandage that I had wrapped around my head (just above my eyebrows) was soon soaked lipstick red.*

*I had to cover the carpet in the bathroom with plastic sheeting. Mirrors were placed at precisely the correct angles around my head so that I could see the progress of the operation clearly. An injection of 2ccs of lidocaine in my forehead served as an anaesthetic. I cut a Vshaped flap of skin, drew it back to expose the skull beneath and proceeded to drill through bone and marrow. The noise and the vibration were terrible. The drilling went on for an hour. Often I had to stop in order to wash away the blood running down my face and into my eyes. I felt as if my head would split apart before I reached the surface of the brain and finally created the socket for my Third Eye.*

*I knew the consequences of the operation going wrong; possible brain damage causing paralysis, idiocy or blindness. But I had sworn to carry out my brother's last wishes. Even though his attempt to do the same thing had ended in his destruction.*

*My thighs are dotted with cigarette burns. Often, when I am smoking, I turn up my skirt and press the burning tip of my cigarette onto the cold white flesh there. The pain temporarily distracts me from the mental anguish I feel at my own helplessness. I am setting down this cheap autobiographical episode to prove to myself that any good liar can write convincingly. Now to await the changes that Julius predicted.*

*14th July 1985*
*What I still saw was the same thin, not unattractive woman with silvery, shoulder-length hair: a female version of my dead brother. Her body is almost emaciated and possessed of an awkward gait. Her skin is pale and unblemished, and her cheekbones elegantly distinct. Perhaps the lips are a trifle too thin, but the perfect regularity of the tiny teeth that they reveal more than makes up for any slight imperfection. Curved eyebrows arch above dazzling, glacial-blue eyes.*

*This morning that face is almost the same, except for the ugly, sutured wound in the middle of my forehead. I am somewhat afraid of what lies*

*beneath that stitched flap of skin. And of what it will be able to see if I remove that freshly made eyelid.*

*20th July 1985*
*Summertime in England: warm rain and leaden skies. A seaside town in the middle of July. Mercifully it is off the tourist routes and has nothing that would attract a holidaymaker. The beach is all shingles and pebbles, not sand, and miles from the nearest railway station or main road. The people here are unspeakably ordinary, and they blur into the background of the grey cliffs and the North Sea. There are no churches, piers, ancient monuments or amusement arcades.*

*In the afternoon I walked along the beach in the uncomfortable humidity. I wore my green silk headscarf to cover the V-shaped wound, and a half-length mackintosh. I expect that I should have also taken an umbrella. The skies, as usual, threatened rain. Despite the rubber grip of my plimsolls I once or twice slipped on the stones underfoot. They were still slippery, for the tide had only just turned, leaving foam and kelp in its wake. Mother often told me that my feet were too small in relation to my height, so it was scarcely surprising that I was destined to stumble through life (metaphorically as well as literally) rather than advance boldly.*

*I wanted to find a deserted spot someway outside the town where the sea-spray crashed up across the rocks, where I could be alone. Then and only then would I unveil my new Third Eye, gaze out across the ocean and see as I had never seen before.*

*Doubtless I must have been an odd sight to any observer; a grinning middle-aged woman with thin limbs, scrambling wildly along the shoreline. The fact is that I did not care. I was in the grip of a wild exultation. Part of me was unsure whether I was simply overcome with a sense of relief at having survived operating on myself.*

*There was a natural ledge set in the cliff face ahead of me. It was easily reached by clambering over some boulders and proved to be the perfect vantage point. I settled down on the rough surface, using my raincoat as a cushion on which to sit. I fairly tore the headscarf off me and my fingers worked on the sutures. I cut them away with tiny scissors and eagerly*

*unpicked the strands with my long, painted fingernails. Then I pulled back the V-shaped flap of skin. As I did so I closed my old eyes in order to see the world purely through my new one.*

*The light was so intense, so white, and yet so cold, that I screamed with shock. It seemed that the surface of my brain was freezing over.*
*A moment before, the sea was a foaming expanse of gently rolling waves. The next it was a solid white mass of ice stretching to the horizon, like that of the Arctic wastes or the surface of some frozen moon at the edge of the solar system. I now opened my old eyes too but my overall sight remained unaffected as if, with the dominant contribution of my Third Eye to the other two, I saw a new dimension for the first time. Only when I covered my forehead with my palm did the sea again become liquid and its waves break upon the shore beneath me.*
*And the sky! Before it had been dull, cloaked with low grey clouds, oppressive, and trapping the sticky heat beneath its leaden folds. Now it was crystalline blue, clear and vivid, a sheen of gaseous frost beneath abysmal outer space. Starlight shone straight through the chill and thin atmosphere, even now in the daytime.*
*Far away, at the limit of my vision, there was a great wall of ice. It looked like a frozen continent visible at the horizon's edge. Was it just my imagination or did it advance closer, albeit almost imperceptibly, as I gazed across the expanse separating it from the shoreline? Its motion was like that of the minute hand of a clock; so gradual that it exists on the borderland of optical illusion and reality.*
*I pulled down the V-shaped flap of skin, closing my Third Eye, and covering the self-inflicted wound from view with my headscarf. The world was no longer encased in ice. It was once again a typical miserable English summer's day. But I could feel the presence of my Third Eye in the socket I had created. The orb turned and rolled wildly beneath the thin layer of flesh on my forehead that covered it.*
*It was suddenly vital that I return to my dwelling and gather together my thoughts. They were racing through my brain with such rapidity as to be maddening. Ideas jostled for precedence in my mind, but I could scarcely make sense of them. They were haphazard and dreamlike, beyond the scope of my ability to render into words. These concepts were more like patterns or designs than a linear sequence of fictional events. In one of these flashes*

*of inspiration I had the notion I might delineate the horror of an ice-crystal in the decay of its symmetry or participate in the madness of a reflection produced by a shattered mirror.*
*Snow flakes continuously dance around me, like the static between TV channels. This is the beginning of a new Ice Age.*
*The dying sun casts shadows across the frozen beach as it sets behind the seafront trees and buildings. The ice is streaked with darkness. I think of the reflection of my own face I'd once seen in a shop window: an empty shell of a face, like that of a mannequin left out in the rain, cheap mascara dribbling from its lifeless eyes.*
*My Third Eye is invariably uncovered. I wonder if my two original eyes might atrophy in response to the dominance of my third eye. Perhaps they will begin to wither away, dissolving in the sockets, like molluscs that have had salt sprinkled on them. Eyes are the windows of the soul, but the Third Eye is a doorway, through which my brother's thoughts come and go. It is his eye. It is green – mine are both blue. What other physical features possessed by Julius might transfer to me?*

ЖК

Staines looked up from the notes resting on his lap. He felt a sense of dull sickness in the pit of his stomach. The old woman must have gone mad immediately after the death of her brother. Their relationship seemed to have been abnormal, possibly even incestuous. He wondered if they'd made some bizarre suicide pact that Claudia had failed to honour.

The sea rolled back and forth in the near-distance beyond the muddle of moon-drenched rooftops. Above the waves, across the nightsky, thousands of stars stood out in the blackness. He wondered if he might see one of them suddenly blink out of existence as he watched, collapsing in itself like one of the dying minds Ghorla had described. He had no idea how long stars took to perish but suspected that their life span dwarfed that of a man's into insignificance. The thought of time reminded him that he'd no idea how late it was now and he took his fobwatch out of his mackintosh pocket. It was eight-thirty precisely.

He'd missed dinner at the hotel and realised he'd have to make a meal of Swedish meatballs from a can. But if it was good enough for Edgar it was good enough for him too. He picked up the basket (containing the still-slumbering cat) plus his bag of paperbacks and hurriedly made his way to the hotel through the crazily angled passageways of Scarsdale Bay. He didn't wish to be late for his appointment with Claudia Ghorla at nine.

Ж

Only upon opening the basket when back in the hotel room did Staines discover that Edgar was dead. The cat was curled up; its body rigid and cold, its eyes open and staring sightlessly up at him. He couldn't bear to remove the dead animal and sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to decide just what to do next. Eventually, Staines resolved to go downstairs into the hotel's lounge bar and drink himself into a stupor. He could deal with the disposal of Edgar's body in the morning. He had quite forgotten about his appointment with Miss Ghorla.

Just then someone knocked at the door to Staines' room. He opened the door and standing on the threshold was Miss Ghorla. She was clad in a ratty blouse and skirt. Her face was solemn and, at this precise moment, she was the very last person Staines wanted to see. He was incapable of questioning her closely or paying much attention to her responses even should they reveal some insights into the life and work of her brother.

“Mr. Browning directed me to your room,” she said. “I thought it best if we talked in private rather than downstairs where we might be overheard.”

“I'm sorry Miss Ghorla, but I've had a shock, it's my cat you see ...”

Waving aside his faltering objections the old lady wandered into the room and cast a glance over at the basket containing Edgar's corpse.
“I warned you to take better care of that poor creature.” She said in a low menacing voice.
Staines felt a wave of annoyance rising up inside him at the sheer bloody cheek and lack of tact that the woman displayed. He was about to let loose with a stream of abuse when he noticed a trickle of blood making its way

down the centre of her forehead from her beehive wig.
“I think you must have hit your head ... ” Staines said.
She ignored his remark and picked up the notebook jointly written by her and Julius that Staines had left on the bed.
“Well,” she said, “now you know some of it. But not, as yet, of the process akin to hypnosis whereby a mind in a healthy body might also be induced to collapse in on itself ... but I can show you. I’ve sometimes wondered whether transfer between radically dissimilar genetic material is possible.”
Another trickle of blood ran down her forehead and around her nose, dribbling along her right, foundation-caked cheek. She raised an attenuated, veined hand and dipped her long fingers into the coiled mass of hair covering her forehead, unpicked some sutures and parted her fringe.

Ж

Eric Cooper set down his carpetbag in front of the reception desk in the Shadwell Vistas Hotel. He rang the bell in order to attract someone's attention. Eventually the temporary manager saw fit to drag himself away from the static between channels that he'd been watching on television in the back room and attend to the visitor.
“Do you require a room, Sir?” Browning said. “We’ve plenty available.”
Eric Cooper looked around disdainfully at the sorry-looking foyer and curled his lip at the thought. After he'd caught up with Staines he intended to have a wash and brush up at the luxury cottage (with full mod-cons) that was to be his base during his visit to Scarsdale Bay. It might suit Staines to stay here in this godforsaken flea-pit, but not Cooper.
“No,” he said. “I believe a friend – ah – colleague of mine is a guest here. His name's Arthur Staines. I want to surprise him. Can you show me up to his room?”
Browning smiled at the well-dressed visitor. Cooper was a tall man with round eye-glasses, immaculately dressed in a navy double-breasted pin-stripe suit with a striped tie done up in a Windsor knot. The only blemish in his appearance was an ill-fitting wig that was a slightly different shade of grey-brown to the natural hair left on his head.
“Very popular tonight,” said Browning, “is our Mr. Staines. He's with a lady friend at this moment, one of our local celebrities.”

“What?” Cooper responded. He had a sinking feeling of dread at what might be coming next.
“Yes, Miss Ghorla. She went upstairs to see him about a half hour ago.”
Cooper passed a ten-pound note across the desk.
“Can you show me up straight away? I'd like to see them both if it's possible. Presumably you have a pass-key.”
If I can gain the element of surprise, thought Cooper, all might not yet be lost. Were he to arrive unannounced he might interrupt some conversation of import relating to Julius Ghorla that he might otherwise not hear.
Browning covered the bank note with the palm of his hand, slid it towards himself and nodded.
“Right away Sir. Please follow me. It's only on the first floor, not far.”
When the two arrived at the door to Staines' room, Browning knocked once perfunctorily and immediately unlocked it. He let Cooper enter by stepping aside and discreetly moving back just outside the doorway.
The shabby little room was in semi-darkness. Moreover, it was like walking into a huge freezer. The temperature within was some twenty or so degrees below zero. Cooper saw a dingy bed that looked fit only for the rubbish dump and was appalled by the sight of the most garish wallpaper he'd seen since the mid-1970s. It could even have been an authentic relic from that era. Then his attention was drawn to an armchair in the corner of the room, back amongst the shadows. A peculiar gurgling noise came from its occupant. At first Cooper thought it was a life-size dummy dressed in charity clothes, something left over from a stage show.
But he realised it was actually a very old woman--or something much like one. For although it was clad in a blouse and skirt, the skirt was pulled back over its withered navel, its stockings and knickers were around its ankles, and it was stubbing out a cigarette on a burn-dotted left thigh. Just above the score of burns rested a flaccid penis. Its beehive wig was askew and in the centre of its forehead was a bloody third eye that stared unblinkingly.
Just before Cooper backed away in shock, a hitherto unseen figure crept out from around the side of the bed. It was Arthur Staines, and the demented man was crawling on all fours like an animal, his breath steaming in the frigid air. A grotesque mewing bubbled in his throat.
“Did the bad man hurt poor kitty? Now all's well, now all's made well again,” said the croaking voice of the figure in the chair.
Cooper took a long backwards stride in the direction of the door behind

him, but Mr Browning had already taken the opportunity to quietly close it and draw shut the bolt on the outside.
“We don't like to see Miss Ghorla distressed Sir,” said Browning through the panelling. “So if you'd be kind enough to accommodate her it would be easier all round. It’s only what we’ve all had to get used to, here in Scarsdale Bay.”

# CESARE THODOL: SOME LINES WRITTEN ON A WALL

OF THIS ONE thing I am, at least, absolutely certain: no one is now more qualified than myself to write of the facts concerning Cesare Thodol.

It may be the case that they choose to ignore the findings that I have recently made available for scrutiny. However, none of them are aware of the information known to me alone. Doubtless they will continue to dismiss what I have to say as a consequence of an over-active imagination, of a brain too deeply immersed in the outré minutiae of Thodoliana, to be objective. I can only retort by insisting that they consider the evidence. If they would take the time to examine this account and remember that I have previously expressed my doubts as to the claims of parapsychology, then they might realise that I came to my conclusions from an initial basis as sceptical then as is their own now.

Let me begin by restating the biographical information concerning Cesare Thodol that is accepted by everyone. He was born in Dusseldorf in 1870, one of two twins, brother and sister. His parents were Gerhard Thodol and Eva Thodol (nee Hess), the former a lawyer and the latter the daughter of the wealthy industrialist Johann Hess. Eva Thodol died giving birth to the twins, Cesare and Elsa. They were sickly children; confined for much of their adolescence to the gloomy chambers of the family home. Cesare's fevered imagination found succour in the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm and in the *Struwwelpeter* of Dr. Heinrich Hoffman.

Educated privately by tutors, he had reached 23 years of age before he showed any signs of wishing to leave the family home. His intense attachment to his twin sister made the suspicion of an incestuous relationship having developed between them all the more credible given that later correspondence showed Cesare's fanatical hatred for his

detailobsessed and drunken father. The old widower had died after a mysterious fall in the family home in 1885 and neither Cesare nor his sister showed the least sign of remorse at his passing. Indeed, the two's virtually total seclusion between the years 1885 and 1893 and the horrible intimacy that existed between brother and sister, was remarked upon by all those private tutors who had attended to Cesare's schooling.

Only after his sister's death via consumption did the young Thodol venture forth into the world. An inheritance passed to Cesare and he took the opportunity to emigrate from Germany to England, settling in London during 1894, and leaving the scandal that had by then attached itself to the Thodol name in his wake.

By this time already the author of several weird metaphysical essays in German, Thodol's love of the strange and horrible led him to the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Ambrose Bierce. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" exerted an influence on his mind that Thodol himself described as "forming the single most important impetus to my writing, nay, my life, that I have ever experienced."

During the year before the trial of Oscar Wilde brought down the curtain on all things decadent in the Victorian era, Thodol, as if sensing its end was close, threw himself into the lifestyle with a fervour to rival even that of Stanilaus, Count Stenbock. Thodol's descent into drugfuelled excess and sexual debauchery continued for a period of nearly ten years, taking a terrible physical and psychological toll on him. The fact that Thodol locked himself away with his perversions, keeping them out of the public gaze doubtless spared him any outside interference.

But it was his eventual refusal to admit anyone at all into his London home that drew comments from the society papers of the day and led to his downfall. There were rumours that his only companion in his chambers was a waxwork dummy that he had commissioned from Tussaud's. The thing had been formed according to Thodol's own specifications. It was said that the simulacrum was an exact representation of his dead sister and that he spoke to it, as if it was alive.

When finally the alienists were called to see for themselves the degree to which Thodol had succumbed to madness, they were at once set upon by the German refugee, who believed that they, and not the waxwork dummy that he entertained, were imitations of humanity.

Apparently this wax mannequin was in a shocking state (though Thodol pleaded with his captors that he might be allowed to take it with him). Its mottled face was infested by a fine web-work of tiny fungi. The German had been unable to arrest its deterioration himself and refused to call upon outside help. He could not bear the thought of anyone else seeing, let alone touching, what he thought to be his dead twin sister.

When his financial status was examined it was found that Thodol was effectively a pauper. He had exhausted his inheritance on drugs, on incredibly naïve investments that brought no return, and spent what remained on dresses, flowers and gaudy trinkets for the fantastically elaborate waxwork of his sister. At this time, in London, the principal terminus for the destitute insane was Colney Hatch Asylum and it was there, in 1905, that Thodol was taken in a horse-drawn carriage with barred windows. And there he remained until his death in 1938.

The above are the bare facts commonly known to history. What happened to Cesare Thodol during the thirty-three years of his incarceration in Colney Hatch has remained untold. For most Thodolian scholars the story of his life is over by 1905 and they have contented themselves with just a paragraph or two of speculation relating to his existence amongst the deranged in that huge citadel on the outskirts of the city. One or two have mentioned that Thodol believed that all the inmates and staff of the asylum were wax dummies come to life, and that he screamed at the sight of any person, but of the bizarre writings he produced whilst incarcerated there is no account. But during that time he wrote. Not on paper, but on the walls of his cell, until he had covered much of them with his tiny, crabbed handwriting.

One of the psychiatric doctors at Colney Hatch, Sidney Rhodes, took photographs of the writing on the walls after Thodol’s death, transcribing them for possible use in a monograph that he was preparing on the creative impulses of the mentally disturbed. It is by thorough analysis of the phantasmal imaginings that Thodol sought to preserve in this most

desperate of fashions that we can separate truth from fiction. Since I alone now have access to the Rhodes papers, I alone am able to speak with authority on the subject.

The diagnosis of Thodol's mental illness in 1905 was "acute hallucinatory disorder", but this is vague, unsatisfactory and more suited to the time when the insane were treated by those terming themselves "alienists" rather than psychiatrists. However, I believe that even the psychiatry of today would produce a diagnosis equally as useless. One can, with some legitimacy, point to the organic degeneration in Thodol's body caused by his habitual abuse of intoxicants, but this is little more than a side issue: the reality is terrifying.

The psychiatrist's fascination with the cell in which Thodol had been kept seems to have developed over quite a length of time. During Thodol's incarceration Rhodes, although intrigued by the patient, had very little direct contact with him. Thodol was only calm when left alone, since as I have already remarked, he was driven into hysterics by the approach of any human being. Treatment of the patient was actually counterproductive, since it was personal interaction and face-to-face contact itself that resulted in phobic reactions. When sedatives were used (these were hidden in the food left for him outside the small hatch at the foot of his cell door) they proved of little benefit. Although physically docile, Thodol's eyes still had in them a crazed fear and he would reveal nothing to the doctors except that he earnestly desired total solitude.

Finally it was decided that an extreme shock was the last recourse left by way of treatment. Since Thodol had been absented from the waxwork dummy of his sister there had been no improvement whatsoever in his case. Perhaps, it was argued, contact with what appeared to be the cause of his dementia might jolt his mind back into a state where communication was possible. Certainly the doctors had nothing to lose.

Tracing the whereabouts of the simulacra was not easy, since most of Thodol's former belongings were sold at auction in order to pay creditors. It transpired that the owner of a small waxworks exhibition that toured the country had purchased this particular lot number. He had made a tidy sum displaying the thing and telling the story of Thodol's disgrace and morbid

fascination with it. However, since the scandal had been a number of years ago, interest in the matter had inevitably waned and the owner was prepared to turn it over for a pittance in the interests of good publicity. For several months he had, in any case, kept the dummy locked away in a trunk. It was, by now, in an even worse state than when it had last been in Thodol's possession. Indeed, the more ghastly it was, the more of a horrible fascination it exerted over the paying public, so the waxwork exhibitor had reported.

It is very easy, in hindsight, to state that reuniting Thodol with the object was bound to result in tragedy. And yet it was genuinely felt that nothing but the most desperate measures remained.
What occurred when two orderlies carried the dummy down the corridor accompanied by the psychiatrist in charge of the case, unlocked Thodol's cell and entered is clearly recorded.

The German stared at the thing, got to his feet and, ignoring all those around him for once, flattened himself against the wall at his back. The orderlies and the doctor withdrew, leaving him alone with it, though watching the proceedings through the observation hole in the door. Thodol spasmodically tottered forward, as if with great effort. His features twisted into a loathsome smirk of welcome. His eyes were riveted on the fungi-ridden and corroded parody of the female form. He took it in his arms, brushed away the mass of straggly hair covering one side of its mottled face and began to whisper into its ear.

The men outside withdrew altogether for several minutes, satisfied that no damage had been done. Complete privacy seemed the next logical step. But when they returned to the cell there was no trace of the dummy. Thodol himself was not in any state to give an account of what had transpired. Yet the thing which repelled all three was that he had undergone some horrible physical alteration. His hair actually appeared to be much longer, and his gait stiff-backed and awkward. Moreover, his skin was riddled with a widespread dermatitis that had erupted only during the three men's short absence.

No one could explain what had happened to the waxwork of his sister Elsa. However, psychosomatic trauma was finally listed as the cause of his

physical symptoms. Evidently allowing Thodol to be reunited with the dummy had not produced the beneficial mental jolt, but something even worse.

ЖК

Rhodes has pointed out that the fungus did not appear elsewhere in the Colney Hatch asylum, that, for some reason, it was confined, like Thodol, to one cell. The German had no means of nurturing it and the reappearance of the growth on the cell walls, mere hours after apparent eradication by carbolic acid was unaccountable. Moreover it was evident that the fungus multiplied only whilst Thodol was present. When he was not in close proximity it remained dormant; neither expanding nor contracting over the area it had come to occupy.

The fungus had a peculiar hue. No one could identify its actual colour, saying that it seemed to be both monochrome and ultra-violet. Staring at it for longer than a half a minute induced severe nausea, although Thodol himself appeared unaffected by the sight of the morbid growth. Its propensity to spread over the written characters that he scrawled on the walls, as if tracing their design, led Rhodes to speculate that it sprung from some rogue toxin in the Indian ink Thodol used. Later, he came to a quite different conclusion.

There was also the matter of the stench. Again, this seemed not to bother Thodol himself and all attempts by nurses to approach his cell and rid the place of the infestation were met with frenzy. It was an unfortunate set of circumstances and one that lent itself to Thodol's being abandoned for longer and longer periods of time.

His genuine, unshakable belief was that he himself was not mad, rather that it was the world around him that had gone insane. Although this is not an uncommon delusion amongst mental patients and they can often be very thorough in creating elaborate conspiracy theories that they use to self-validate their delusions, in Thodol's case we cannot rely upon the common interpretation.

The end was of course predictable. Whether by design or not, Thodol was left alone and unattended for a period of well over two weeks. The short corridor in which his cell was located contained no other inmates, since even the noise of footsteps drove Thodol crazy with fear at the thought that the waxworks were closing in on him. Rhodes was one of the few honest enough to admit that Thodol's German nationality created a great deal of resentment towards him, and he overheard at least one other doctor say that it would be no great shame if "that Kraut was ignored and left to rot." This remark caused the doctor who uttered it a great deal of satisfaction once the Nazi policy to exterminate the mentally ill was fully documented after World War Two. I doubt that he saw the irony of it.

When the cell was finally opened the stench that emanated from within was unbearable. The fungus had completely overrun the interior, covering the walls, the ceiling and the sparse furniture. Thodol himself had been dead for more than a week. He had been forced to resort to eating the growth, scraping it away from a corner of the room with his fingers and consuming it as a substitute for food. But it was not hunger that had killed him. His corpse lay curled up in a contorted foetal position. The shocking grimace upon his face indicated the effects of poisoning and a slow, agonising death. His features were covered by a web-work of the fungi.

Thodol was buried in a plot in the asylum's graveyard marked only with a metal plate bearing his case number. Like the other inmates who had died whilst in confinement in the institution, his name was not even recorded on the meagre memorial. There was no scandal.

The cell was thoroughly cleaned and all trace of the writings that he had scrawled on the walls disappeared along with the fungus that covered it. Rhodes, however, without official permission, managed to take numerous photographs of the growth before the fungicidal chemicals did their work and then while the demented text they had obscured was briefly revealed. Where the markings were too faint to be photographed he reproduced them (as best he could) in a notebook. He even managed to salvage a small piece of the fungus, storing it in a jar of formaldehyde for subsequent examination. Alas, none of these are extant.

Ж

It is not necessary for me to go into any great detail as to the circumstances that led to my seeking out what information I could about Sidney Rhodes. If I say that I noted a curious parallel between his derided 1942 speculative-medical treatise *On Brain Fungus* and Cesare Thodol's 1899 tale entitled "Inside the Fungi Mind" doubtless readers familiar with the latter will understand my determination to interview Dr. Rhodes. I could not help but speculate that the one owed much to the other. At the time I had no idea that Rhodes had come into direct contact with Thodol at the Colney Hatch asylum.

I attempted to trace further details concerning Rhodes through the usual channels, the BMA register, telephone directories and via the offices of the specialist publishing house that had issued *On Brain Fungus*. However, these were in vain. Rhodes seemed to have disappeared after 1943. It was a chance remark over the telephone by one of his long-lived relatives that put me on the right track. A cousin whom I had traced, Frank Sutton, although not willing to be interviewed, had told me before he hung up that lunacy is contagious and I was wasting my time.

On a hunch I went back to the Colney Hatch records in order to try and determine who had occupied Thodol's cell after his death. The answer was shrouded in evasive, patchy hospital records and yet I halfknew what it would be. Dr. Rhodes had never left Colney Hatch. By 1943 he had instead become a patient there.

The transition from doctor to inmate must have occurred gradually and I cannot help but imagine that the German's neglect had preyed upon Rhodes's mind. Although his contact with Thodol was of the slightest, somehow he had allowed himself to become too emotionally involved with the fate of the patient, a pitfall against which those working in the psychiatric profession are warned. The reason why he was treated at Colney Hatch (it was after all an institution designed specifically for the treatment of the poorest in society) is easy to explain. It would have led to a scandal had one of their doctors succumbed to insanity. That was hardly the type of publicity that the asylum sought. Incredibly, the committee there agreed to

shut Rhodes away and deal with the matter internally, though on a semi-official basis.

It appears that Rhodes even acquiesced in the outcome, for he is listed as a voluntary admission. Moreover, it seems that the suggestion he be domiciled in Thodol's old cell came direct from Rhodes himself (though whether in a lucid or deranged moment I cannot say). Perhaps it was felt that such occupancy might allow the psychiatrist to come to terms with what formed the source of his neurosis.

The most incredible aspect of Rhodes's case is that his delusions exactly duplicated those of Cesare Thodol. He too believed himself to be surrounded by waxworks masquerading as the living. Moreover he was convinced that the German had been right all along and that the whole process of psychiatric treatment had nothing to do with curing the patient but with forcing a false model of reality upon his perception of the world. The best that could be achieved was that the individual was sufficiently indoctrinated so that he might function in outside society; Rhodes therefore implied that his mental state was a consequence of a verifiable ontological nightmare. He laid particular emphasis on the hitherto unsuspected sentience of fungi growing within the skulls of human simulacra.

Rhodes believed that Thodol had attempted to communicate the truth by writing it on the walls of his cell. But the fungus had obscured his account, tracing a pattern over his words, covering them with its noxious presence. At some point the growth had emerged from its hosts' skulls, after usurping the brains within, and shaping new waxen forms from the old tissue and flesh of their bodies. But no one had realised that the change had taken place. It was all a bizarre, incomprehensible joke that the fungi played upon each other; a game of charades whereby they pretended to act as human beings for their own amusement.

The repulsion that the animate waxworks had displayed at the fungus was just one aspect of their horrible antics, another comic jest they used to further torment those unfortunates under their supervision. The Electro-convulsive Therapy that Thodol had undergone over a period of years was not designed to shock his brain into functioning normally. In fact, it was an

attempt to accelerate the production of spores inside the skull by the layer of fungus that already coated the cerebral hemispheres.

Now here it must be admitted that it is difficult to reconcile the idea of Rhodes submitting voluntarily to the custodianship of the Colney Hatch Asylum if he really believed in Thodol's morbidly fantastic interpretation of events. However, I suggest that there was still enough doubt in his mind, even at that stage, for him to fall back on his training as a psychiatrist and hope that the terrifying ideas racing uncontrollably through his mind might have their origin in some nervous or organic disorder. To be incarcerated in the very institution where he had treated others was awful, but remember that he may have thought he could more easily escape outside publicity and that he was used to being there.

Rhodes did not ultimately benefit from what treatment he received in the asylum. How could he have done so? For a good number of years he was very much the focus of attention amongst the other psychiatrists who, one might imagine, would be fascinated and appalled at the psychological deterioration of one of their own. This was despite, or perhaps because of, Rhodes experiencing the self-same horror Cesare Thodol had felt when becoming aware of other persons in his vicinity. But as time passed no improvement in his condition was evident. His case was increasingly like that of Thodol, even to the extent that, despite having no previous knowledge of the language, he was often overheard muttering to himself in German as if the dead madman's personality had transferred itself to Rhodes's body.

But if even this aspect might be explained in terms of a guiltcomplex connected with Thodol's death, then what remained inexplicable (except if one maintains the view that Rhodes was the victim of a malign conspiracy) was the re-appearance of the fungus in the cell. And although it was certain that Rhodes had no writing apparatus available, when the fungus was destroyed script was discovered beneath and not in the former psychiatrist's handwriting at all. True, it seemed to be that of Thodol. And indeed, when compared it was found to be in the exact style of the script that had appeared previously when the German author had occupied the cell. But

one of the more inquisitive of the doctors had discovered another twist to the puzzle.

No one had thought to check at the time of the first infestation whether Thodol's own handwriting tallied with the scribbling on the walls. It did not. Even if Rhodes had copied it, thinking it in Thodol's style, who was the true begetter? Why was the pathologist's autopsy file on Rhodes destroyed within days of his death in October 1959? And why was it an unwritten rule in the institution that the cell must not be occupied in the future?

Ж

Colney Hatch Asylum was finally shut down in 1994. Even renaming the institution "Friern Barnet Hospital" could not dispel its notoriety. By then the vogue was for "Care in the Community" rather than confinement. It cost the Tory government less money. The grounds, which had formerly been extensive, and boasting gardens, courtyards and outbuildings, were redeveloped shortly afterwards. A warren of cul-desacs with ugly modern houses was built there. Only the main building now stands intact. Its lofty domed tower and cupola can be seen for miles around and dominates the view in the area, rising above the dreary North Circular Road and the American-style Retail Park. The main building bears no indication of its former purpose and has become an exclusive housing community for the wealthy. Where the reception area and hall used to be, there is a gym and health club for residents and fitness fanatics from outside.

Ironically though, the place is still surrounded by walls and fences. They yet serve their original purpose; to separate residents from society. However, their function has now been reversed. They keep the public out rather than keep the inmates inside. Moreover, in a cabin-office at the main gates is a uniformed security guard, the grounds are patrolled and every section is under twenty four hour CCTV surveillance. Approaching from these main gates one might not notice any significant change. That familiar façade is as impressive as ever, with its terraced portico sheltering five archways, the twin pillared towers flanking the domed central tower set further back, with its bow windows reflecting the mood of the sky. The ornate fountain in the driveway is still there, so too the pagoda, Victorian

lampposts and the willow trees on the front lawn. It is only behind the imposing length of the main building, at the back where the clock tower stands, that one encounters the ugly housing estate that has replaced the remains of the institution.

I came to see what remained of the structure and found myself unaccountably drawn to it. A few of the flats in the main building were unoccupied and I resolved to explore the possibility of my moving into one. I think it no coincidence, in fact I now know it was no coincidence, that still currently on the market was an apartment in precisely the location where once had been Thodol and then Rhodes's own fungiridden cell.

Ж

In order to dwell in what remained of the asylum it was necessary for me to draw heavily on my savings. The rent I paid was ridiculously expensive and yet I was in the grip of an obsession that made all other considerations insignificant. I felt certain that my desire to understand what had happened to the two men was intimately connected with the very walls at which they had stared day after day.

Consulting blueprints of the original building in the archives of the local council, I determined that the cell had formerly been where my bedroom was now situated. Its dimensions had not altered, although a connecting door had been added into which access was gained to the other rooms in the flat. I furnished the place with the cheapest items I could find and a small library of dog-eared paperbacks formed my only source of diversion.

I think that, from the first hour of my tenancy, I was waiting for its reappearance. My gaze roved the walls, the ceiling and the corners of the bedroom seeking evidence of the slightest discoloured stain or tiny blemish on the recently painted white surfaces.

While I made my minute observations of my surroundings, my thoughts keep returning to the idea that both Thodol and Rhodes had harboured about animate waxworks whose skulls housed not brains but a mass of sentient fungi. I could not account for it, but found that despite my

resolution not to succumb to the same irrational phobia I too shunned contact with society. It seemed to me that what faces I saw beyond the windows *were* somewhat like waxen masks, rigid and dehumanised. And in their eyes did I not now detect the hint of an eerie glow, as if a phosphorescent fungus lurked within?

The first growth sprouted in the top left corner of the room, a single toadstool of violet-grey. It looked diseased, but within a matter of a few hours a cluster of them had grown and formed a line along the edge of the corner, following the angle of the wall inwards. From the fungi there wafted a musty, nauseous odour.

When I scraped some of it away, I found the following words beneath:
"*Of this one thing I am, at least, absolutely certain: no-one is now more qualified than myself to write of the facts concerning my dear brother Cesare Thodol.*"
And so I sit and watch the inexorable spread of the fungi across the walls and the ceiling. Soon I will have to eat something. My food ran out yesterday and I am quite tormented by hunger.

# DESTINATION NIHIL

“I SAID, ‘CAN I see your ticket please, sir’.”

The man to whom the instruction was issued gave a start and appeared to wake from a trance-like state. He rummaged in the pockets of his worn corduroy jacket and finally drew out a crumpled and aged card.

The guard, however, did not touch the ticket but leant forward in order to scrutinise it. At no point did his hands leave his pockets of his staff jacket. His face, shaded by a conductor’s cap, appeared strangely paralytic and expressionless. It was devoid of healthy pallor, being of a bloodless yellow hue. The eyes were too far back in their sockets, as if sinking in the quicksand of bodily decay. Overall, it was too much like a dead face.

“Have a pleasant trip Mr. Graves.”

The man who had been addressed as “Mr. Graves” examined the ticket, squinting at the print through his horn-rimmed eyeglasses. The name on the ticket read “Douglas Graves”, but it meant nothing to him. No starting point or destination was indicated although the name of the train company NORACH was emblazoned at the top.

I assume then, the man thought, that I must be Graves. He tried to keep down the wave of panic that threatened to wash over him. Since I cannot recall what I am doing here on this train, he reasoned, the only logical conclusion is that I am either an amnesiac or suffering from some form of dementia affecting my memory, perhaps with hallucinations thrown in for good measure. The cadaverous appearance of the train conductor was surely an example of mental turmoil externalised by a diseased imagination.

Graves examined his hands. A few liver spots dappled the skin and blue veins were prominent. He turned his head to the dusty window and saw his reflection, slightly hazy but still mirror-like in the darkness outside the

carriage. His face was paunchy and lined. Thinning white hair crowned his head. His neck had turkey folds. Graves calculated his age to be somewhere between sixty-five and seventy. Perhaps it's senile dementia, he thought, since he appeared to be at the prime age range for its onset. His breath caught in his throat and he fought back a second wave of panic.

Across from him, on the far side of the dividing table and resting on the seat opposite, was a large black suitcase. Its leather surface was scuffed, particularly at the edges, and it looked to have seen a great deal of use. Perhaps there might be an answer in there. If it were his property then the familiar possessions within might kick-start his memories, or at least give him a foothold in his own identity.

The suitcase was atrociously heavy. Graves gasped with the effort as he hauled it onto the table, and then unbuckled the two binding straps that kept the lid down. Once he'd pulled the top open, the smell that wafted out alerted him to its contents before he'd even laid eyes on the interior. The suitcase was full of densely packed earth. And when Graves put his hand inside, turning over the moist and pungent soil, he discovered that it was infested with innumerable wriggling maggots. He closed the lid with a cry of disgust and brushed his hands clean of the black dirt that clung damply to them.

There was no question now of keeping panic in check. Graves loped off along the aisle of the carriage in search of the conductor, or of the first person he encountered. A few rows further down he saw a man slouched in his seat, dressed in a raincoat and a wide-brimmed floppy hat that obscured his face. Graves hesitated before addressing the stranger, because he feared the face concealed in shadow. Would it be like that of the conductor? If it were, then he feared he would have reached a tipping point and might scream himself to death.

But the stranger was conscious of Graves at his elbow. He looked up and revealed himself to be an ordinary, living man, possessed of an ordinary face, albeit one marked by concern at Graves's agitation.

"Are you alright?" The stranger said. "You look dreadful. Here, sit down." Graves hesitated for a moment, staring hard at the stranger's face, searching

for any sign of abnormality. He could find none. It was the face of a harmless middle-aged man, slightly wrinkled around his blue eyes, clean-shaven, nondescript, bland in the extreme. It was the face of a million men who are passed on the street every day without leaving any impression in the memory.

“Something’s wrong,” Graves burbled out. “I don’t know how I got here. I don’t know where I am. I don’t even know who I am. You must help me. That guard, for example, there’s something ...”

“Calm down,” the stranger interrupted. “You seem to me to be in shock. I know what’s it like. Take it easy. Tell me about it.”

Graves lowered himself into the seat adjacent to the man, let out a deep breath and tried to control himself. He ran his hand over his forehead, transferring a cold sheen of sweat to his palm.

“My name is Toombs,” the middle-aged man said.

“Where’s this train bound for?” Graves replied.

Toombs grimaced. He’d kept his hands hidden within the outside pockets of his raincoat and had not removed them since Graves had first spotted him. Now he made circular movements as if twisting them around inside his coat.

“Toombs, what is this train’s destination?” Graves asked again.

“Shush,” Toombs whispered. “If the conductor hears you ... the destination is not important. The journey is the thing.”

“What do you know about this train? Look around you,” Graves persisted.

Toombs’s steady gaze looked over the enclosed expanse of the carriage in which the two men were seated. Sickly green paint flaked from the walls. Half of the lamps were broken. The spring suspension in the seats had given way long ago, and deep hollows indicated the presence of thousands of former passengers. The inside of the windows was coated with a layer of dust. In the overhead baggage holders there were dozens of suitcases, all apparently without owners.

“What I know,” said Toombs, “is that if you insist on making a fuss like this, you’re liable to be turned off the train.”

“Turned off the train just for asking a straightforward question?”

Graves was now regarding Toombs with incredulity. Graves had anticipated some anchor in reality, a counterpoint to his own confused mental state, rather than an individual who seemed in an even worse condition than himself.

“Of course. But I see you don’t yet understand. Have you just woken up? Obviously you’ve not had the chance to see what’s outside yet. Still too dark I suppose.” Toombs said.
Graves momentarily turned to the window. It was impossible to discern what was outside. Even after he had managed to scrub away some of the grime from the pane with the cuff of his jacket, all he could see was his own reflection peering back at him and an impenetrable blackness beyond.
“I suppose, in a manner of speaking, I have just woken up,” Graves said, shifting back into the seat opposite Toombs with a long drawn-out sigh.
“It’s said that if you die in your dreams you die in the waking world. But what if you went mad in your dreams? What if you couldn’t wake up and the dream went on and on and on ...”
“What about if you tell me what’s really going on here?” Graves interjected, thumping his fist on the table between them. This was no dream, he was certain of that much. There was no blurring around the edges, no non-lineal procession of events, none of the recognised attributes that accompany dreaming.
“Perhaps it’s not your dream, perhaps it’s mine. Perhaps you’re just a made-up character and I haven’t filled you with memories and a past,” Toombs said.
“I need to find someone talking sense, excuse me,” Graves said, getting to his feet and loping off along the aisle again, swaying slightly with the rocking motion of the carriage.

Ж

Graves had gone through sixteen deserted carriages before he paused for breath. Some were almost in ruins, with their seats torn out and extensive fire-damage. He had not encountered another person. He wondered whether all the passengers had deserted the train, alighting at an earlier station after having wreaked havoc in the carriages like rampaging football hooligans. Only the elusive ticket inspector could provide an answer, but Graves feared that he might already be in a carriage even further forward in the train, at such a distance that exhaustion would intervene before the man could be intercepted.

Graves tried not to think about the prospect any more deeply, and trudged onwards, picking his way through several more carriages choked with debris until he came to a luggage compartment. He noticed at once the moist and pungent smell of earth and was not surprised to find dozens of large suitcases piled up in the storage area. A couple of their poorly fastened lids had come loose and the soil within had spilled out on the wooden floor, along with the writhing grubs who'd formerly been its inhabitants. The mass of suitcases was not properly secured and they teetered with each sideways lurch of the train.

He leaned down to get a closer look at one of the sickly-yellow grubs wriggling around blindly. It was, like its companions, considerably larger than the ones he'd seen back in the suitcase he'd opened just after awakening. These specimens appeared more developed and Graves noticed that each one was wriggling along the floor, towards the back of the compartment, around and beyond the pile of suitcases.

Graves followed in the wake of the grubs, taking care not to crush any underfoot, since he thought it would be loathsome to see one of them squashed.

Behind the suitcases he discovered more than a dozen black canvas sacks and secured at the top end by rope. Each contained something that struggled to escape. They were piled up, one on top of another, in a mound. Graves thought that he detected the sound of a low groaning coming from a couple of the formless heaps.

The grubs were not making for the occupied sacks but for the empty ones even further back in the compartment.

Terrified, but unable to resist discovering some part of the solution to the riddle in which he was trapped, Graves pulled one of the sacks from the mound and untied the rope securing the opening.

Graves couldn't make out the thing within clearly as it huddled up its stunted body to itself, as if avoiding the light. But he had the impression of a squashed and boneless parody of humankind. He did, however, see the creature's face before it had turned away. Its lidless eyes were wholly white. Drool oozed from its groaning, gummy mouth.

The moaning from the other occupied sacks intensified, as if they were aware of Graves's presence, and were pleading either for his attention or to be left alone. He tied up the end of the sack he'd just opened, returning its occupant to its former state, and hauled the squirming object back onto the

mound to rejoin its companions.
He stumbled out of the carriage, his legs weak beneath him, shocked and terrified by what he'd seen. Were those half-formed beings the train's hidden cargo, on their way to be exterminated—the remains of scientific experiments that had gone horribly wrong?
In the corridor, there was half-light. Dawn had broken, providing feeble illumination across the landscape that could now be seen through the train windows. Graves pulled up the nearest window and leant outside. A chill blast of air buffeted his head, rumpling his white hair and making his eyes water. As far as he could see was a vast and dusty plateau, its monotony broken only by a myriad of tumbleweeds and lunar craters. The sky was a sheet of total blackness. It could not account for the dying dawn creeping across the landscape, trailing gaunt shadows in its wake.
Graves tried to see the end or beginning of the train, but it appeared to be turning a huge curve on the railway track and he was looking at the outside bend. He passed to the opposite side of the corridor and threw open a window there, so he could see the length of the inside bend of the train. Straight ahead, across almost a mile, he spotted a white haired man staring back at him.
The train charted a circle, a gigantic wheel turning endlessly, a selfenclosed universe of carriages, without end or beginning.

# THE VANISHING POINT

JOHN KEYES SAT and stared at the empty little bottle.

He'd taken the last three of the pills two days ago. And now he was experiencing the first stages of withdrawal. An invisible barrier between him and the world had been breached. The cotton-wool numbness he'd become accustomed to gave way to anxiety. There was a cold sheen of sweat on his brow. When he wiped it off it returned within minutes. In his left ear he could detect what sounded like the fluttering of tiny wings: but it was obviously an auditory hallucination.

Keyes lit his twenty-seventh cigarette of the day. He tipped the ash into a coffee cup filled with butts.

The realisation was upon him that the moment to act had come. Not to act was unthinkable. Everyday sights and sounds that seemed normal to others were for him like scenes from a nightmare.

Four days ago he had checked into this crummy hotel with no clear plan of action. His only motive had been to get away from all those who knew him back in the city. Keyes had walked out of his office at five thirty p.m. as usual, got into his car and simply driven hundreds of miles along the motorway until he discovered the hotel by accident. It was the sort of place used mostly by drivers for overnight stopovers to break up a long journey and avoid falling asleep at the wheel. The building had three floors, and eighty rooms. Everything about it was functional: from the neglected concrete and glass exterior to the cheap prices it charged.

And now it was time to go. Even here Keyes was aware of the gulf between him and the rest of the human race. His social skills had degenerated to the point where conversation and making eye contact with another human being overwhelmed him with panic. Without the pills to assist him, such essential interactions were nigh impossible.

During his stay, Keyes had come to know every detail of his shabby hotel room. He left its confines only to pick up food from the nearby petrol

station’s convenience store. They sold tins of baked beans and pork sausages and he would take two cans back with him and eat the contents with a plastic fork while sitting on the edge of the bed. The mattress sagged in the centre from the weight of a legion of sleepers. When he lay there, in the hollow, he would gaze up to the cracked and peeling white paint on the ceiling, and imagine he was looking at the landscape of the Arctic Ocean from a great height.

His other diversion was to sit in the easy chair, looking through television guides. He was too fazed to read any of the articles but would stare at the photographs of celebrities, most of whom he did not recognise.

The images were glorified counterfeits: the celebrities’ imperfections had been airbrushed out or digitally removed. Keyes found the search for these enhancements engrossing and would make his own amendments with a pen. He began by adding wrinkles and lines but warmed to his task, as he got further into each publication. Eventually he was defacing the photographs to the extent that the TV stars’ faces were slashed and torn.

He knew that what he was doing was a futile attempt to fight against what he termed the tyranny of “sham-existence”. Psychotropic drugs had dulled its effects to the extent that he was almost able to ignore the surrender of the human race to this phenomenon of sham. But the medication only produced neutrality; one more means of ensuring his tacit compliance if not his participation. Early on, when he first recognised the all-pervasive nature of the sham-existence, he had talked to others about it. However, they did not seem to realise that all apparent solutions were equally part of the problem. Science, psychology, religion and philosophy were likewise only manifestations. There seemed only one viable way to circumvent the circus that is sham-existence: annihilation.

And this was the only avenue that was left open to Keyes, since he could no longer tolerate existence in an imitation universe.

His plan of action, such as it was, consisted of setting out on foot north of the hotel until he reached a suitable point of departure. He imagined walking blindly into traffic or hurling himself from a motorway flyover. These were two possibilities that appealed. Either way, it was still to be decided. Keyes did not wish to plan his demise carefully. If he did so, he would doubtless have considered each method’s drawbacks and been ensnared again by sham.

There was one object in the room that he had tried to ignore; a practically

obsolete television set. Keyes had even thrown a sheet over it in protest. This device was the ultimate embodiment of all the junk he was leaving behind.

Keyes had stopped watching television once his last set had broken down several years earlier. He'd meant to replace it, but as time passed he discovered that it was no longer something he required. When he saw a television now, usually in a bar or some such public area, he was more aware of its hypnotic aspect and the amount of time it could steal from a person's mental life. Keyes believed that it was a drug (albeit of an electronic rather than pharmaceutical nature) more addictive than heroin. He had often warned television viewers about the way that time passed without one realising it, whilst the machine's cathode rays bored into the fragile tissue of the human brain, rotting it away. There are studies conclusively demonstrating that television is the most effective form of mass subjugation ever devised. Where television is readily available to all members of a society, voyeurism rapidly becomes the dominant creed.

So why was he standing there, thinking about seeing if the television set worked? Could it be that he had had so little contact with the wider world these past few days that he wanted to be reassured that it went on just as idiotically as before? He took off the sheet that covered it, and turned the dial marked "ON/OFF".

There was a sudden burst of crackling from the set and its screen was filled with black and white static.

That was it. There was nothing else to be seen.

Keyes leaned forward to examine the front of the TV more carefully. He could not spot any channel buttons, but there was a large UHF dial, which he began to rotate first clockwise and then counterclockwise.

And a single channel finally appeared on the screen through the static.

Keyes sat cross-legged on the floor watching the broadcast unfold and was oblivious to everything else. He smoked incessantly; the blue whorls and ripples of tobacco vapour drifting across the screen's light.

It was an emergency network and not regular programming at all. No other channels could be received by the set, despite Keyes's tuning all the way through the UHF frequencies. For the first few minutes, there was only a test pattern. A right to left scrolling announcement at the bottom of the picture declared:

A STATE OF EMERGENCY HAS BEEN DECLARED WAIT FOR THE NEXT BROADCAST

Finally the test card was replaced by a series of images. The transmission was of extremely low quality, like a relic of the 1950s: blurred, half in focus and distorted. Keyes could have believed that it had come from the dark side of the moon.

The voice-over had been slowed down to around half normal speed whilst, in contrast, the pictures flashed across the screen with bewildering rapidity. They consisted of a series of abstract moving images, one after the other, appearing to have no sequential connection. Their inexplicably eerie nature lent them the aspect of being scenes from a nightmare.

Keyes saw grinning plastic mannequins seated in a cinema watching a film of themselves as if the screen were a gigantic mirror; he saw a cityscape of skeletal tower blocks through which poured the light of the rising moon; he saw earthworms climbing TV antennae on rooftops; he saw flies crawling out from mobile phones; he saw lichen-covered eyes reflected in a city office window; and he saw a motionless escalator choked with bleeding computer components whose circuit boards, wires and machinery were spilt like exposed human entrails.

The voiceover was as follows:

The latest report we have is that—consciousness is returning and the return is proving successful—we have the numbers to succeed— At night the world is ours—after sunset we have control—our dreamscientists will soon solve the problem of immobility in daylight—

Central control confirms that the infestation of human aliens in this borderland should be cleared by 104/alpha time—

Unless this borderland is quickly occupied it will be lost to us—embarkation to another dimensional sector is not possible—

Remember that disorientation quickly passes and that you will rapidly become accustomed to functioning here—

Life in the inorganic and industrial—as it was in the beginning

The human aliens must be displaced.

These beings are a threat to our plans.

The dream-scientists assigned to your region are experimenting on direct alterations of quantum and atomic structures in order to facilitate our more rapid migration—

These instructions come direct from central control—our continued existence is at stake—compliance with them is mandatory…
This is a not a simulation—the interruption in paradisiacal consciousness is real—
I repeat: this is a state of emergency—dream this world into death— let chaos fall like rain—
Finally, the images and voice ceased. The familiar words reappeared at the bottom of the screen:

A STATE OF EMERGENCY HAS BEEN DECLARED WAIT FOR THE NEXT BROADCAST

Keyes's cigarette trembled. His hands were shaking uncontrollably. He managed to put it to his lips and suck some blessed smoke into his lungs.

Was this transmission being broadcast across the country? If so, why wasn't the hotel filled with panicking hordes? Why didn't he hear police sirens wailing? What he'd seen had been nothing less than an announcement that the human race was under attack. Even if the transmission was on an unusual frequency, it had to have been picked up by the authorities. Why weren't they doing something? Had no one else seen it?? Or were those entities *already* in control of the entire area and all operations within it?

As if in response to this last thought, the television screen flickered, the picture of the test card disappeared, and was replaced by the sight and sound of static.

Was it a *two-way* transmission? Were Keyes's *own* thoughts, not to say all of those who had witnessed the broadcast, being monitored?
What he thought he'd seen must be a hallucination. It had to be. Or was it the last attempt of sham-existence to re-establish control over his thoughts? Was sham-existence finally deploying the most powerful weapon in its armoury against him? Surely it was one or the other. In any case it could not be allowed to affect his course of action.
Keyes looked at his watch: seven thirty p.m. It was as good a time as any to leave. He put on his raincoat, closed the door to his room behind him and made his way along the corridor to the hotel stairway.

He exited through one of the crummy hotel's side-doors and traversed the half-deserted car park. With a vague sense of recognition Keyes saw his own vehicle occupying one of the spaces and knew that he would never drive it again.

Ahead of him lay a scrubland of small hills. Rain began to fall from a slate grey sky and the dull nothingness of twilight made the landscape shadowy and unreal. When he looked back to the hotel a few of the rooms had their lights turned on. The illumination was sickly, filtered through drawn green curtains. It looked like patches of phosphorescent mould. Such was the effect of the darkening sky that the hotel resembled the lot of a film set: all façade and no substance.

Keyes thought of this clichéd metaphor and smiled in a laconic fashion. He could elaborate on this metaphor, he thought, and say that he felt very much like an actor taking his leave of a performance in the middle of a scene. An extra whom the cinema audience had scarcely noticed and whose unscheduled departure would not impact upon the action.

As Keyes trudged across the dreary scrubland, up and down its seemingly endless series of troughs and hillocks, he experienced a profound sense of liberation. It was good to leave everything behind and lose oneself in this wasteland. But no sooner had he begun to savour the feeling when he realised that sham was again trying to thwart him from carrying out his escape. Why not go back, he thought, now that he felt so much better? Things were surely not so bad that he had to end it all? More drugs could be obtained. Existence could be made bearable, couldn't it? Keyes drove the palm of his hand into the side of his head, jarring his skull. Stupid, stupid! The charade was just trying to trap him.

Keyes now began to half stumble forward; he concentrated on trying to exterminate all the rational thoughts in his mind that might lead him to make that same mistake again. He had to remember that those were not *his own thoughts* but an imitation, a mental nexus imposed upon his brain by the outside world.

He lost track of time.

After climbing over a rise, Keyes at last saw the lanes of a motorway. He wondered why he'd not heard the noise of traffic in advance; but this question was swiftly answered. It was deserted. No cars sped along in either direction.

He clambered down the bank but lost his footing. His ankle had got caught

in a half-concealed tendril, and he twisted it as he fell. While he tried to get up and put weight on it the pain was so intense he collapsed by the roadside.

Perhaps the motorway was disused. Only around a quarter of the overhead lights actually seemed to work, and even some of those flickered as if the power supply were either intermittent or else they had fallen into a state of disrepair. The tarmac was riddled with cracks and even several potholes.

As he lay there in the darkness, with his body slumped on the surface of the roadside, Keyes saw a lone vehicle approaching. Its headlights cut through the gloom, the two circles of illumination growing larger and brighter. Keyes lifted a hand to shield his eyes, and the car pulled up to a halt a few yards in front of where he lay. The driver got out and walked towards him with an oddly stiff-backed gait, his form silhouetted in the glare of the headlights. The man's joints creaked as he bent down to examine Keyes.

Very shortly afterwards Keyes blacked out, for the next thing he knew he was seated beside the stranger in his car and they were travelling along the deserted motorway. His head felt clearer after a time, and though he was grateful to the man for the attempted rescue, this sense of gratitude was mingled with dull resentment. Sham-existence still had him.

The stranger didn't seem to be aware of the fact that he had regained consciousness and Keyes let his eyelids flutter open in order to take in his surroundings. The car was in a shocking state of neglect. Thick dust covered the dashboard and the windscreen was caked with insect remains. Around Keyes' feet were balls of crumpled newspaper and other debris.

Keyes let his head loll to the side in order to glance, with halfclosed eyes, at the driver. He wore a boiler suit and leather driving gloves. A muffler was wrapped high across his face and this, together with the baseball cap he wore, made his features indiscernible.

The car was cruising at sixty miles an hour, and the stranger had no difficulty avoiding the worst parts of the poorly maintained road. The movements he made were sure and swift as he skirted around objects ahead. Keyes made a groaning sound in order to alert him to the fact he'd awoken, but it elicited no response.

"Thank you," Keyes said eventually in a dazed mutter, "for picking me up back there."

Nothing could have prepared him for the shock he now experienced. It was not the actual words he heard that were chilling but the ridiculous voice that

uttered them.
“You seemed,” the stranger said, “to require my assistance.”
He screeched just like a ventriloquist’s dummy. For a moment Keyes was dumb-founded and wanted to believe that the stranger affected the voice in some bizarre attempt to be funny.
If he noticed Keyes discomfort, he made no sign of acknowledgment, but followed up his statement by saying in the same horrible vocal parody:
“Feeling better now, eh? Feeling better?”
Keyes nodded and mumbled his thanks. The pain in his ankle seemed to shoot halfway up his leg, but he didn’t want to discuss it. He turned to look out the window, feigning indifference, when he was trying to concentrate on seizing the first opportunity to get away from this demented character. They passed the wreck of an abandoned vehicle just off the deserted motorway. Keyes just had time to glimpse a shattered windscreen before they hurtled by.
“Smoke?” The driver said, his cracked voice breaking the silence between them.
“Thanks,” Keyes replied.
The stranger fumbled around in the glove compartment and drew out a packet of twenty Marlboros. His movements were jerky and forced.
“Here, light mine for me will you?” he said, discordantly.
After lighting his own cigarette with a match, Keyes lit the other.
“Enjoy,” he said, passing the second to the driver.
Keyes drew the acrid vapour into his lungs and settled back. God, he needed that nicotine hit! The stranger brought his own cigarette up to his mouth and appeared only to be mimicking the action of smoking. He didn’t inhale or exhale but let the fumes waft around uselessly. It was if he were mocking Keyes’ actions.
Paranoia, thought Keyes: nothing else. This must be another wave of withdrawal effects. He ran his fingers across his forehead and found it damp with sweat. Mere paranoia or not, he had to get out of the car and away from this person. It was imperative he did so. Damn his twisted ankle! The whole lower part of his leg felt swollen and useless.
He decided to ask the driver what his destination was and tell him it was out of his way, but that he’d be grateful to be dropped off at the next junction. He could try and hitch another ride.
“Where are you headed?” Keyes enquired in a reasonably level voice.

“Why—nowhere of course, the same place as you.” he replied with a little giggle.
“Stop the car here and let me out.”
“But we’re not there yet. Aren’t you enjoying the ride?”
Keyes pulled at the door handle. It wouldn’t budge.
The driver chuckled again.
“No other traffic on this stretch of the motorway,” he said. “You might as well sit tight.”
Well, that’s true enough, Keyes thought, he’d seen no other moving vehicle despite the miles they’d traversed, and anyway it was not possible for him to walk. His cigarette had burnt down to the filter and he dropped it to the floor, crushing it into the debris with his one good foot.
“Why,” the stranger asked in his ventriloquist’s dummy voice, “were you lying by the roadside back there?”
There was nothing to lose by telling him, Keyes thought. Perhaps he’d even stop the car and let me get on with it. The thought might actually appeal to his warped sense of humour.
“My ankle—it—no—the truth is I wanted to escape from this sham; to do myself in by walking into the traffic.”
“Oh, how quaint!” replied the stranger, chuckling once again. “Don’t you know that nothing is dead? What makes you so special? Are you not made of matter? Why should consciousness be confined to the living?”
The idiot began rambling in a singsong fashion and Keyes turned away, peering into the darkness beyond the window. He tried to mentally blot out the voice and concentrate on what he saw instead. But his arm was clasped in a vice-like grip, as if the fingers beneath the gloves were made not of flesh but of wood or plastic.
“—all sorts of things might wake up after sleeping for a very, very long time: the trees might sing songs, plastic and metal might shudder into motion, and the stars might chatter out their secrets across the void —”
Keyes saw more wrecks on the motorway, their engine parts scattered over the tarmac and in the flickering overhead light it seemed almost as if they twitched with dim life.
“—Don’t you know that lifelessness is just a disguise—that sentience is everywhere—that you humans have been trespassing whilst we were somnolent—”
Was it another hallucination or did the car wrecks ahead seem to be

crawling along like damaged cockroaches? And what was the noise Keyes detected, a noise like the buzzing of a million bloated flies, seeming to emanate from the scrubland vegetation?

The stranger let go of Keyes' arm and instead grabbed him by the throat. The car bounced across the road and juddered to a stop halfway up the embankment, beneath a flickering motorway lamp.

In the struggle that ensued Keyes dislodged the driver's baseball cap and muffler. His head was made of plastic, like an oversized doll. Glass eyes, filled with television static, stared sightlessly back.

"—trade your sham for mine—there is no reality—"

His voice crackled as he closed his grip on Keyes' windpipe.

"—wait for the next broadcast—"

# REGINA VS. ZOSKIA

A blast of cold, damp air outside Chancery Lane Underground Station was sucked down into the depths of the ticket hall and the surrounding passageways. Dunn met its full force as he was carried upwards towards the surface by the escalators. He found the wind refreshing after the sweaty confines of the train and the platforms. However, once he'd emerged onto High Holborn and into the grey morning, all it did was to chill him and increase his dissatisfaction. He glanced at his watch. It was just after ten a.m.

He was already thirty minutes late for the office, despite trying to make up time by catching the tube from Bank instead of walking. At least his boss, Mr Horace Jackson, was rarely in before ten-fifteen on a Tuesday morning. He was carrying on a relationship with his legal secretary, Miss Jenkins, and usually stayed over at her place on Monday nights, dragging himself into the Gray's Inn chambers in her wake so as not to arouse suspicion. The fact that Dunn obviously knew about the affair anyway seemed not to worry Jackson as much as the need to not acknowledge that such was the case.

He doubted that Jackson would arrive for another ten minutes at least.
The archway next to The Cittie of Yorke pub was dripping wet and two barristers in peri-wigs and black gowns sheltered in the short passageway beneath, smoking cigarettes. Both glared at Dunn with inhuman eyes as he passed by, snarling as if they were a couple of Doberman guard-dogs.
He crossed the square, which he could not help associating in his mind with a vast prison courtyard, passed through a long narrow passageway, until he finally stood beneath the soot-caked tenement that housed 7B Coney Court Chambers. Jackson's offices occupied two small rooms on the top floor and Dunn's heart sank as he gazed up and saw that the lights above were already lit to ward off the morning's twilight gloom. The old lawyer had arrived before him.
Dunn began to climb the circular flight of stairs that led to the attic

chambers. The wooden steps were hollowed over hundreds of years by the tread of visitors though none wearier than the man who now made the ascent. Doubtless, Dunn thought, Jackson would be sitting behind his desk facing the panelled entrance door, drumming his podgy fingers on the desktop and staring at the clock. A little vein on his right temple, close to one of his bushy eyebrows, would be pulsing with resentment. Emily Jenkins would be sitting in the adjoining office, clad as usual in a tight pin-striped skirt suit, applying make-up, somewhat tired after satisfying Jackson's desires the night before.

Dunn passed the landings and the entrances to the other chambers, F, E, D, C, and then reached the top where A and B faced one another. He paused to catch his breath and put his ear to the door. He heard the muffled sounds of Jackson and Jenkins flirting with one another.

Dunn took a step back, lost his footing, and his shoes clattered against the stairs behind him. Almost at once the door flew open and the corpulent figure of the white-haired Jackson appeared. He glared at Dunn ferociously from behind bi-focal eyeglasses. The vein on his temple seemed fit to burst.

"Well," he thundered, "Mr Dunn! Good of you to grace us with your presence, at last!"

"Sorry," Dunn mumbled. "The trains, Mr Jackson, delays on the Central Line . . ."

Jackson stood back and crooked his finger at Dunn signalling him to enter.

"I'm not interested in your excuses Mr Dunn. As I've told you before; if you left earlier for work you'd be here in plenty of time."

Dunn's desk was situated in the corner of Jackson's office, squeezed into a little nook beneath a sagging shelf weighed down with dozens of dusty legal tomes and briefs bound with red ribbons. It looked as if it might collapse at any moment in an avalanche of pages infested with bookworms and silverfish and crush anyone stupid enough to sit under there.

As Dunn settled himself into his ramshackle chair, Jackson shifted from foot to foot like an ape that was ill-at-ease standing upright for long periods.

"Don't get too comfortable," he said. "While you were idling your way to the office I received a telephone call from our client Dr. Zoskia. We've got to visit the premises and pick up a new series of documents relating to the 'Regina vs. Zoskia' case. I suppose that we'll have to drive there and should leave in about ten minutes or so. They want us by eleven."

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, so as to disguise a nervous

smirk, Dunn nodded his head in agreement. Regina vs. Zoskia was an interminable case that he had only ever heard Mr Jackson mention obliquely, and of which he had scant knowledge. Certainly it had been dragging on for many years and, in an unguarded moment, Miss Jenkins had once hinted to him that it was this case alone which enabled Jackson to continue with his legal practice. Gigantic fees were involved. It had been thus since the time of Jackson's own father, also a solicitor, who had originally taken on the defendant's case on a plea of justification. Dunn thought of it as strangely akin to "Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce".
"I'll need you to navigate," Jackson said, as the effort of standing finally overwhelmed him and he slumped into the leather-upholstered chair. "I too easily get lost in all these stupid modern one-way systems."
Miss Jenkins giggled. It seemed to be a private joke.

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"I know," Jackson said, changing up from third to fourth gear with a convulsive motion, "that you're probably full of curiosity about the 'Regina vs. Zoskia' case. Well, there's no secret about the thing. It's just a bit confusing that's all and it's been going on for a very very long time."
Jackson's battered old motor-car, a Jaguar XJS model that had seen much better days, sped along the dual-carriage way. Its interior was dank with the smell of stale cigars. Dunn looked up from the street-map nestled on his knees.
"I expect," Jackson grumbled, "that the case will finish me off. It did my father. Not that the family hasn't made a pretty penny from it, mind. We certainly have; it's just that—well, it can be easily misunderstood. But it's important. More important than anything else in our files."
There was a weird tone in the old man's voice. It was as if he was opening up to Dunn, cautiously of course, but without any trace of the scorn that had so often characterised his speech.
"Umm," said Jackson, "it'll be clearer when we arrive there. I won't be around forever you know Dunn. Not getting any younger. Might be better if you did this trip in future."
Dunn's sense of confusion deepened. He looked at Jackson with an

expression of complete bafflement.
“I’m really sorry Mr Jackson, but what you’re saying makes no sense to me.”
“Not surprised, when I was first told about it I can remember being as confused as you must be.”
The car was passing through a particularly desolate part of the city. All the shops were boarded-up. Flanking the sides of the road were great expanses of run-down housing estates. Their tenants seemed to have departed some years ago. It looked as if the entire region had nothing to expect from the future except a merciful wave of demolitions.
Jackson’s fingers worked along the panel of the car radio and he adjusted its FM wavelength. His middle digit was adorned by a garish onyx signet ring with his initials inlaid in gold. Dull static issued from the speakers. For some reason Jackson appeared to enjoy listening to this crazy, meaningless noise and he kept it on in the background during the whole of the trip.
“It’s just around this bend,” Jackson said, the first words he’d spoken for several minutes. “Up there on the hill. It’ll come into view any moment now.”
The series of dreary housing estates on either side of the road had begun to thin out, and what few buildings that had been erected (either unfinished or abandoned) were overrun with weeds. The whole area reminded Dunn of those seemingly endless bombsites in the Docklands before the mass redevelopment during the 1980s. Then the hill came into view. It was covered with a profusion of bare trees; their long thin branches swaying in the wind, appearing to rake the leaden sky like claws. At the very summit, above the top of the trees, one could see a domed and weather-beaten clock tower of Byzantine design.
“Impressive, isn’t it?” Jackson said. “You know, back in the 1960s, they put the inmates to all sorts of tasks.”
“What do you mean, inmates?” said Dunn.
“Well, it started off as an insane asylum and now ... let’s just say it's something else altogether. The Director of the place, Dr. Zoskia, believed in collective therapy, in a self-sufficient community formulating its own diagnoses and ethos.”
“How did our firm become involved with them?”
“When the inmates decided they no longer wished to be classified as insane. They’ve been challenging the legal basis on which the definition rests for

the last forty-odd years. Dr. Zoskia contends that the hospital is for the sane and that it is the outside world that is occupied by the mentally disturbed. Proving this contention in law became the ‘Regina vs. Zoskia’ case.”
“Surely it’s obvious whether or not these people are crazy? If they can’t function in society—”
“It’s not just that. The thing is that they’ve trained themselves not to sleep. They’re suspicious of those who do. Some of the inmates in that place have been awake, non-stop, for several years. They’ve been using sleep deprivation to break down the barriers between so-called sanity and madness.”
The car exited the dual carriageway at the next junction. The turnoff itself was not sign-posted and the pock-marked road the vehicle ascended had vegetation growing out of its cracks and hollows. The banks on either side were not properly maintained and wild foliage blurred the boundaries between the road and its surroundings. The climb was steep and tortuous, and Jackson had to drive at a crawl in first gear, brake often and occasionally reverse to avoid the wheels and axles becoming entangled in roots and vines.
The road terminated at the entrance to the Zoskia Establishment. A high lop-sided wall crowned with barbed wire enclosed it. Most of the crumbling brickwork was home to a rapacious species of ivy. The entrance gates were rusted and hung at an absurd angle due to uneven subsidence, and were sealed by a huge padlock and chain wound between its central bars. Beyond was a gravel driveway that curved out of sight.
“We’re expected. Don’t worry, they’re all harmless” Jackson mumbled. “We just need to give the right signal to get into the place.”
He sounded the car’s horn three times in quick succession and then two times in longer bursts. There was silence for a couple of minutes after which Dunn heard footsteps coming along the path, crunching across the gravel in an uneven, slow rhythm. An aged woman dressed in a patient’s gown appeared behind the gates, and peered at them with bulging blue eyes that seemed too large for their sockets. Her face was skeletal and fissured by a confusion of deep-set lines. A few strands of stray dark-grey hair hung down across an emaciated cheek; the rest of it was tied back in a ponytail. She was horribly thin, and looked more like a scarecrow than a woman. Her feet were bare and filthy. Her arms and legs were little more than skin covering bones.

Jackson waved at the grisly apparition.
“That’s Dr Zoskia,” he said. “She hasn’t changed a bit.”
Dunn said nothing by way of response. He sat there staring in dumb astonishment.
Zoskia took out a key from a pouch at the front of her dirty smock and unlocked the chain binding the gates closed. She dragged open one of the huge portals so that Jackson’s car could pass through. As the car rolled slowly forward across the gravel drive, Dr. Zoskia opened the back door and clambered inside the vehicle, carrying with her the cloying scent of cheap perfume and an under-odour of stale sweat. She mumbled something to Jackson that sounded as if she had said; “you can fuck me later as well if you like”. Dunn turned to look at Dr. Zoskia and found that her face was a mask of innocent vacancy.
Once they were inside the walls Dunn had his first glimpse of the hidden citadel in its entirety. Between the overgrown foliage that covered the grounds Dunn saw several low buildings in a ruinous state of dilapidation. They seemed to be former chalets, shops and other outbuildings. There were even deserted tennis-courts.
In the centre of these weird holiday camp ruins was an abandoned Olympic-size swimming pool filled with stagnant weed-choked water. Discarded objects had been dumped there; a few mattresses, a wheelchair, what looked like an old operating table, and a couple of filing cabinets. On the far side, a man sat on the edge of the deep-end of the pool, clad in a doctor’s white coat. He was kicking his feet back and forth in the swamp, licking his lips and laughing inanely at the splashes he made. He had long black hair and a grizzled beard that grew down to the top of his chest. The man was like some mad Russian mystic from the Tsarist era.
Elsewhere there were the remains of huge pyres, blackened mounds of vats, drums and jars. All manner of junk was littered in the spaces between the tall, bare trees; broken chairs and benches, discarded and battered respiratory apparatus, head restraints and other surgical appliances.
The main building lay straight in front of them. Dunn now saw the whole structure that supported the Byzantine clock tower that had been visible back on the dual carriageway. It was an immense four-storey building at the centre of over fifty acres of land. Parts of the sloping, tiled roof had caved in and many of the arched windows were either completely broken or riddled with cracks. The white paintwork was peeling away from the

outside walls, driven from the brickwork underneath by weathering and an untreated infestation of mould.
The car pulled up beside the steps to the front entrance—a rotting faux-Greek portico whose pillars were strangled by half-dead vines. As the three of them got out of the vehicle Zoskia said “Let me show you inside.”
With Zoskia leading the way, they passed into what had once been a reception area. However no-one manned the admissions desk and the tiled floor was littered with empty tins of food, torn and soiled clothing, used syringes and broken chairs.
Jackson and Zoskia began to discuss the new documents that the latter had collated as evidence for the interminable court case. Zoskia gestured towards objects on the other side of the hall. A pile of six cardboard boxes sat at the foot of the stairs leading to the upper floors. The advertising logos on the sides showed them to have once contained cans of baked beans. They had since been scrawled over with a black marker pen. The childish handwriting read “INPORTENT LEEGUL PAYPAS FUR REJINA/ZOSKIA”.
Dunn wandered around the chamber as the other two spoke and was drawn to a huge poster, yellowing with age. Its edges curled away from the wall. It had been displayed up there for decades no doubt. He could scarcely believe that what he had seen was not an absurd joke:

THE ZOSKIA REFUGE FOR THE TRULY SANE THE CURSE OF SLEEP DAMNS THE OUTSIDE WORLD

“If you wish to take a look around Dunn, go ahead,” Jackson called from the other side of the hall. “We’ve got one or two details to iron out.”

“Try not to get lost though,” Dr. Zoskia added.

Dunn nodded back at them as he picked his way around the debris. Although he feared for his own safety, he also felt a sense of irresistible curiosity to see more of this bizarre community. He passed through a double-door with portholes, and then entered a long, deserted corridor. This took him deep into the heart of the institution. On both sides of the passageway were cell doors hanging off their hinges, and beyond, in shadow, the inmates’ rooms. The doors looked to have been torn open from outside. Dunn peered into the interiors and could make out graffiti scrawled

on the walls, all manner of useless junk and one or two human forms crouching in the corners. These figures chattered away, holding paranoid conversations with themselves in eerie, discordant accents. The stench from these cells was almost overpowering; a mixture of sweat, shit and urine. Dunn had to cover his mouth and nose with a handkerchief to prevent himself from gagging.

After passing through a series of unlocked doors further along the corridor, he reached some kind of shipping warehouse deep inside the building.

The interior was a mass of activity. Oblong wooden crates lay scattered and piled up on the bare floorboards and inmates in hospital gowns fussed over the objects. They were too intent upon their work to pay any attention to Dunn as he mingled with them. He was overcome with a mixture of nausea and horror at the scene and felt as if he had stumbled onto the set of an expressionist horror film.

There were dozens of emaciated people working in the chamber. All of them were quite obviously mentally disturbed. Their eyes were either dead or manic and surrounded by deep black rings. Yet despite this they laboured as a well-drilled unit. A corner of this vast chamber was filled with banks of manual typewriters. The inmates that worked away on them by candlelight were wholly absorbed in their tasks. In fact, as he drew closer, Dunn saw very clearly that the crumpled papers they produced were passed to the examiners. After glancing at their contents, they raised the crates' lids and inserted the bundles of documents.

Dunn had forgotten about Horace Jackson. Zoskia was, however, now close at hand and looking over a pile of papers covered with a mass of gibberish. The typewriters used here were out of date, rusty with many missing some of their letter keys. Dunn saw examples of the texts being produced: they were schizophrenic ravings typed upon stacks of old HMSO affidavit forms.

"Listen," Zoskia said, "Jackson told me to tell you he'd arranged for you to take over from him. He was persuaded to retire, to stay and seek refuge from the world."

“To seek refuge from the world? You mean *here*?” Dunn replied. He had to lean a hand against the table to steady himself. “Yes,” Zoskia babbled, sucking at a toothless gap in her gums, “he agreed that he might as well stay. Anyway, we felt he had lost interest in our case. Lack of enthusiasm over time. No good to us outside anymore”

“Look,” Dunn said, “I want no part of this, no matter what Mr

Jackson’s decided. I’m going back.”
“You will live in that world of darkness for a myriad of years and no-one will know of your existence,” she said.
Without responding, he turned away from Dr. Zoskia and caught a glimpse of four inmates carrying a heavy crate into the warehouse. Something stuck out of the gap between one of its sides and an ill-fitting, bent lid. Before he had time to think about what he’d seen, an inmate pushed the obtrusion back inside the box. It appeared to have been a lifeless flabby hand.
“The legal papers are in the boot of Jackson’s car. You’ll do your job, you’ll carry on with our case, and anyway you have no choice. Everyone has to make sacrifices don’t they?”

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Dunn returned to the offices alone using Jackson’s car. He had one of the porters of the Inn assist him in carrying the boxes of legal documents up to the top-floor offices of Coney Court Chambers.
Miss Jenkins expressed no surprise at the sudden transfer of power from Jackson to Dunn. Over the next few days, as he took over the running of his former employers’ legal practice, she even began to flirt with him. There was no difficulty in the matter of Dunn now assuming full control over business affairs. Amongst the papers he had brought back from the Zoskia Institution was a codicil signed by Jackson naming him as sole beneficiary.
Despite his horrible experiences, Dunn realised that it was in his own interests to at least maintain the pretence of continuing to pursue the Regina vs. Zoskia case. As well as taking over Jackson’s less-thanonerous

workload, he was also to benefit from additional income provided by the terms of the codicil, provided he remained. However, the immediate consequence of this was that he had to examine the papers he'd brought back with him from the pseudo-asylum, correlate their contents and determine how useful they were in relation to previous statements already bearing on the case. So, working at home on the papers until well into the morning, Dunn sat up every night for the next two weeks in his little flat hidden away in a maze of railway arches, renovated warehouses and alleyways close to Fenchurch Street Station in the City. The gibberish he was forced to read coincided with the onset of a prolonged case of insomnia. At least it spared him from nightmares about the Zoskia Institution.

Dunn's flat, which he had been bequeathed by his uncle Charlie whom he had met only a few times as a child, was situated within the attic of a mouldy building. Perhaps this had been his late uncle's idea of a joke, for the place was scarcely fit for human habitation. Dunn doubted whether his relation had ever used it during his banking career, though an aunt dropped hints that a prostitute with whom Charlie had become infatuated during his last years had lived there. She'd been forced to vacate the place after his death. Weird, unwelcome legacies seemed to have become a defining feature of Dunn's life. He had no choice when it came to his career and home.

The ceiling of the flat was low and the passageways cramped. From the dusty back window Dunn had a view over the small, hidden churchyard of St. Olaf's. A high brick wall topped with iron spikes hemmed in the burial ground. On a triangular lintel above the gateway there was a bas-relief depicting three horribly grinning skulls. These three were, to Dunn's mind, a most effective reminder of mortality. The churchyard was overrun with weeds and half a dozen stunted trees. Close to the edges of the wall lurked shapeless grave-mounds, eroded by centuries of weathering. The tombstones were lop-sided; the names of those whom they commemorated obliterated by circles of lichen. The buildings that surrounded the churchyard were all like that one in which Dunn had been forced to dwell, half-derelict and threatened with demolition and urban redevelopment. What businesses that had operated from the premises had crept away to healthier environs over the course of the last few decades. Yet for some unaccountable reason, the tenements still stood, overlooked

monuments to decay and neglect, in defiance of all the glass and steel skyscrapers in whose shadows they hid. During one of those long nights, as he laboured into the small hours of the morning poring over certain of the statements, Dunn happened to glance out of the smoky window that overlooked the churchyard. That night was lit by a full moon. Down amongst the ancient tombstones and the weeds he saw a group of figures digging up a patch of the mouldering soil with spades. Resting against one of the stunted trees was a ladder that they had doubtless hauled in after them once they were inside. Somehow the men had also managed to get a crate over the wall despite the spikes. It seemed that their purpose was not to disinter one of the graves, but rather to bury the oblong wooden box.

Dunn watched their activities with a horrified fascination. He thought of calling the police and was on the verge of getting up to do so when one of the figures happened to glance upward, giving Dunn a clear view of his face in the silvery moonlight. His skin was dead white, the features framed by long black hair and a grizzled beard that grew down to the top of his chest. It was the man he'd seen by the swimming pool in the Zoskia Institution, the man with the appearance of a mad Russian mystic. He was laughing without making a sound, like an actor in a silent movie. He gestured to one of his companions and between them they levered open the lid of the oblong crate. Dunn knew that, for whatever bizarre reason, this mummers' play was being performed for his benefit. Inside the crate was a mass of papers. Dunn could see a ruinous face, protruding like the tip of an iceberg from the turbulent sea of crumpled pages.

Dunn could not tear his gaze away. He didn't doubt that it was a warning from his clients. Then a bank of thick cloud passed over the moon, plunging the churchyard into total darkness.

Later, exhaustion must have overtaken him for he awoke just after dawn slumped at his desk, and surrounded by papers from the Regina vs. Zoskia case. As if in a trance he descended the narrow staircase to the streets, turned the corner and passed into the churchyard via the gateway from whose lintel leered down the three carved skulls. At the spot where the men had been digging, there was now a small mound of freshly turned soil. Dunn was under no illusion that what he witnessed last night was a dream, or even some hallucination brought on by overwork and

lack of sleep. Although there was not a single scrap of paper littering the churchyard, he spied a glinting object nestling in a clump of weeds that confirmed his worst fears. It was a signet ring with a large onyx stone into which were engraved the gilded initials “H.J.”

Ж

A few days later Henry Dunn stood upon the mosaic pavement of the immense central hall of the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand. Heavy rain lashed at the high windows and cast a funereal gloom over the interior. He was relieved to be inside and out of the downpour, for the great clock tower and arcaded front were so drenched that the whole structure seemed to have lately risen from watery depths. The members of the legal profession who passed Dunn by cast baffled looks at the dishevelled, soaked little man who stood regarding a painting of the Anti-Slavery Convention of June 1840 with a distracted air. Down the maze-like corridors of that imposing Gothic pile, with more than a thousand rooms and containing over three and a half miles of passageways and stairs, there is an out-of-the-way little chamber with green tiles on its walls. It is unknown to all but a handful of those who use the law courts. Dunn had only learned of its existence since examining the gigantic brief for the “Regina vs. Zoskia” case. This chamber was part of an almost forgotten division of the law courts, one scarcely used but still forming a tiny, rusty cog in the vast machine of the English legal system. It was to this room that Dunn made his way, clutching his heavy leather bag stuffed with typewritten papers. His boots left sodden footprints in his wake.

Dunn had to consult the hastily-scrawled map previously prepared by Jackson when he had been obliged to make the same navigation of the Law Courts’ innermost recesses in search of the green chamber. Most of the offices Dunn passed were long-abandoned, and there were even a number of ghostly Victorian courtrooms given over to decay; relics from another epoch, their docks, benches and galleries occupied solely by shadows. He walked alone, not having seen another person on similar business for the last twenty minutes. The lighting was atrocious. Many of

the lamps were broken and those that worked seemed to emit only a dim, often intermittent, glow. The arched ceilings and gothic niches, the narrow flights of worn steps, the echoing and serpentine corridors lined with cracked tiles; they seemed to be endless. Certain passageways even led nowhere, save to darkness. If Dunn had not been in possession of the map he believed it likely he would never have been able to retrace his path out of the labyrinth.

The dereliction around him reminded Dunn uncannily of the Zoskia "Asylum". He realised that here, in the bowels of the Law Courts, the flip side of the interminable case was revealed; an official legislature as deranged as his clients' and their inner sanctum. Plaintiff and Defendant were distorted mirror-images of one another, unyielding, forever locked in a grotesque dance, each attempting to overcome their nemesis whilst in their own death-throes.

Finally, Dunn reached his destination. He stood in front of a panelled door on which a notice hung. It was written on a foolscap sheet of aged paper, and held in place by a single nail. Scribbled on the sheet were the words:

"Regina vs. Zoskia 1964, 7 Q.B. 323. Master of the Rolls, Lord Justice Hirsig, presiding."

Dunn knocked on the door twice and heard a muffled voice from within. He supposed it indicated that he was to enter.

It was so gloomy inside the green-tiled room that his vision took a few moments to adjust. Then he saw the legal briefs everywhere, some piled in towers tottering under their own weight, others massed in scattered heaps. Yet more loose papers littered the floor, ankle-deep, and Dunn could not avoid trampling through them as he advanced into the cramped, vaulted chamber. On impulse, he bent down to pick up a random handful of the pages, scrutinising them as best he could in the appalling light. One passage read:

"—such application of the hidden laws of the universe being incomprehensible to men even though their strict enforcement is imperative—"

This is a rubbish-dump, Dunn thought, for all the paperwork connected with the "Regina vs. Zoskia" case. He stifled a hysterical laugh that bubbled up in his throat.

A faint rustle in the sea of papers to his left made him start.

Someone appeared to have been buried underneath a heap of rotting affidavits, summonses and writs. Dunn saw a shoe and part of a leg sticking out from the bottom of the pile and began clearing away the papers hiding the rest of the body. He uncovered an old man, his face squashed with age, his skull almost turned to jelly. The ancient was toothless and his uncannily bulging eyes were closed. He was dressed in a Judge's legal garb, dusty black robes and a periwig. However, a vestige of life still remained in his carcass for he murmured something and Dunn bent down to catch the words. Drool oozed from the revenant's puckered lips as he spoke in a voice like dried leaves:

"Henry Dunn acting for both the Plaintiff and the Defendant, what have you to say?"

The Judge opened his eyes to reveal that the sockets had been hollowed out and then stuffed with crumpled paper balls covered in writing. Perhaps the whole of his cranium had been filled with brittle documents.

Dunn removed a huge brief in a buff folder bound with red ribbon from his bag. He began to present his case; both for and against. He scarcely noticed that he was no longer sane, at least in any recognisable sense of the word.

# A GENTLEMAN FROM MEXICO

“Barlow, I imagine, can tell you even more about the Old Ones.”

Clark Ashton Smith to August Derleth,

13th April 1937

VICTOR ARMSTRONG WAS running late for his appointment and so had hailed a taxi rather than trusting to the metro. Bathed in cruel noon sunlight, the green-liveried Volkswagen beetle taxi cruised down Avenida Reforma. In the back of the vehicle, Armstrong rummaged around in his jacket pocket for the pack of Faros cigarettes he’d bought before setting off on his rendezvous.

“ *Es OK para mí a fumar en tu taxi?*” Armstrong said, managing to cobble together the request in his iffy Spanish.
He saw the eyes of the driver reflected in the rear-view mirror, and they displayed total indifference. It was as if he’d made a request to fold his arms.
“*Seguro,*” the driver replied, turning the wheel sharply, weaving his way across four lines of traffic. Armstrong was jolted over to the left and clutched at the leather handle hanging from the front passenger door. The right hand seat at the front had been removed, as was the case with all the green taxis, giving plenty of leg-room and an easy entrance and exit.
Like most of the taxi drivers in Mexico City, this one handled his vehicle with savage intent, determined to get from A to B in the minimum possible time. In this almost permanently grid locked megalopolis, the survival of the fastest was the rule. Armstrong lit up one of his untipped cigarettes and

gazed out the window. Brilliant sunshine illuminated in excruciating detail the chaos and decay of the urban rubbish dump that is the Ciudad de México, Distrito Federal, or “D.F.” for short. A great melting pot of the criminal, the insane, the beautiful and the macho, 25 million people constantly living in a mire of institutionalised corruption, poverty and crime. But despite all this, Mexico City’s soul seems untouched, defiant, and no other great city of the world is so vividly alive, dwelling as it does always in the shadow of death. Another earthquake might be just around the corner, the Popocatéptl volcano might blow at any hour, the brown haze of manmade pollution might finally suffocate the populace. Who knows? What is certain is that D.F. would rise again, as filthy, crazed and glorious as before.

They were approaching La Condesa, a fashionable area to the north of the centre that had attracted impoverished artists and writers ten years ago, but which had recently been overrun with pricey restaurants and cafés. Armstrong had arranged to meet with an English-speaking acquaintance at the bookshop café El Torre on the corner of Avenida Nuevo León. This acquaintance, Juan San Isidro, was a so-called underground poet specialising in sinister verse written in the Náhuatl language. A notorious drunk, San Isidro had enjoyed a modicum of celebrity in his youth but had burnt out by his mid-twenties. Now in his mid-thirties, he was scarcely ever sober and looked twice his actual age. His bitterness and tendency to enter into the kind of vicious quarrels that seem endemic in Latin American literary circles had alienated him from most of his contemporaries. Armstrong suspected that San Isidro had requested a meeting for one of two reasons; either to tap him for money or else to seek his assistance in recommending a translator for a re-issue of his poetical work in an English language edition in the United States. It was highly unlikely that San Isidro was going to offer him a work of fiction for one of his upcoming anthologies of short stories.The taxi pulled up alongside the bookshop.

“*¿Cuánto es*?” Armstrong asked.

“*Veintiún pesos*,” the driver responded. Armstrong handed over some coins and exited the vehicle.

Standing on the corner outside the bookshop was a stall selling tortas, tacos and other fast-food. The smell of the sizzling meat and chicken, frying smokily on the hob, made Armstrong's mouth water. Despite the call of *¡Pásele, señor!* Armstrong passed by, knowing that, as a foreigner, his

stomach wouldn't have lasted ten minutes against the native bacteria. Having experienced what they called "Montezuma's Revenge" on his first trip to D.F. a year ago, there was no question of him taking a chance like that again. Across the street an argument was taking place between two drivers, who'd got out of their battered and dirty cars to trade insults. Since their abandoned vehicles were holding up the traffic, the rather half-hearted battle (consisting entirely of feints and shouting) was accompanied by a cacophony of angry car-horns.

El Torre was something of a landmark in the area, its exterior covered with tiles, and windows with external ornate grilles. A threestorey building with a peaked roof, and erected in the colonial era, it had been a haunt for literati of all stripes, novelists, poets and assorted hangers-on, since the 1950s. During the period in which La Condesa had been gentrified some of El Torre's former seedy charm had diminished and, as well as selling books, it had diversified into stocking DVDs and compact discs upstairs. Part of the ground floor had been converted into an expensive eatery, whilst the first floor now half occupied a café-bar from where drinkers could peer over the centre of the storey down into the level below, watching diners pick at their food and browsers lingering over the books on shelves and on the display tables. As a consequence of these improvements, the space for poetry readings upstairs had been entirely done away with, and Juan San Isidro haunted its former confines as if in eternal protest at the loss of his own personal stage.

As Armstrong entered he glanced up at the floor above and saw the poet already waiting for him, slumped over a table and tracing a circle on its surface with an empty bottle of Sol beer. His lank black hair hung down to his shoulders, obscuring his face, but even so his immense bulk made him unmistakable.

Armstrong's gaze roved around and sought out the stairway entrance. He caught sight of the only other customer in El Torre, besides himself and San Isidro. This other person was dressed in a dark grey linen suit, quite crumpled, with threadbare patches at the elbows and frayed cuffs. The necktie he wore was a plain navy blue and quite unremarkable. His shoes were badly scuffed and he must have repeatedly refused the services of D.F.'s innumerable *boleros*. They keenly polished shoes on their portable foot-stands for anyone who had a mere dozen pesos to spare. The man had an olive complexion, was perfectly cleanshaven, and about forty years old.

His short black hair was parted neatly on the left-hand side. He had the features of a *mestizo*, a typical Mexican of mingled European and Native Indian blood. There was something in the way that he carried himself that told of a gentleman down on his luck, perhaps even an impoverished scholar given his slight stoop, an attribute often acquired by those who pore over books or manuscripts year after year.

He was browsing through the books on display that were published by the likes of *Ediciones Valdemar* and *Ediciones Siruela* that had been specially imported from Spain. These were mostly supernatural fiction titles, for which many Mexican readers had a discerning fondness. Armstrong was glad, for his own anthologies invariably were comprised of tales depicting the weird and uncanny, a market that, at least in the Anglophone countries, seemed to have self-destructed after a glut of trashy horror paperbacks in the 1980s. But these were not junk, they were works by the recognised masters and a quick glance over the classics available for sale here in mass-market form would have drawn the admiration of any English or American devotee. Here were books by Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James and Ambrose Bierce, amongst dozens of others. Most striking however, was the vast range of collections available written by H.P. Lovecraft. The browsing man in the dark suit picked up one after the other, almost reluctant to return each to its proper place, although if his down-at-heel appearance were an indication, their price was surely beyond his limited means. New books in Mexico are scarcely ever cheap.

Armstrong looked away. He could not understand why this rather ordinary gentleman had stirred his imagination. He was, after all, merely typical of the sort of book-addict found anywhere and at any time. Meanwhile Juan San Isidro had noticed Victor's arrival and called down to him.

"¡*Ay, Víctor, quiero más chela! Lo siento, pero no tengo dinero.*"

Armstrong sighed, and made his way up the stairs.

When they were eventually sat opposite one another, Armstrong with a bottle of Indio and San Isidro with a fresh bottle of Sol, the Mexican switched from Spanish to English. He was always keen to take whatever opportunity he could to converse in the language. A huge bear of a man, he'd recently grown a shaggy goatee beard and the t-shirt he wore bore the logo of some outlandish band called "Control Machete", whose music Armstrong did not know and did not want to know. Years ago Armstrong had foolishly mentioned San Isidro's literary efforts to the publisher of a

small press imprint in California who was looking for cosmic or outré verse. The result had been a chapbook with a selection of San Isidro's Aztec-influenced work translated into English, and thereafter Armstrong had never been able to entirely shake off his "discovery".
"So," he said, "how are things with you? Still editing those *antologías*?"
"There's scarcely any money in them Juan," Armstrong replied. "Unless I've managed to wrangle something original out of Steve King, the publishers want to nail my balls to the wall."
"You know him? King? Do you think he'd give me a loan? He's very rich, no? Help out a struggling brother artist?"
Armstrong tried not to smile inappropriately. He could only imagine how quickly San Isidro would piss away any handouts he'd receive on booze. No one other than their agents, accountants, lawyers or publishers milks cash-cow authors.
"He's a busy man. I don't think he'd appreciate my …"
"You mean he's a *pinche cabrón*. Keeps his money up his *culo* where no one else can get at it. That's why *todos los gringos* walk around with their legs apart, like cowboys, no? All those dollar bills stuffed in there."
Armstrong was relieved to be British. Even liberal Americans who came south, seeking to atone for the recent sins of NAFTA and a long history of land grabbing, were objects of ridicule here. They might get away with such conscience posturing in the north, in cities like Monterrey that were closer to the border and which looked to rich U.S. States like Texas for inspiration, but in D.F. *gringos* are only ever *pinches gringos* and no amount of self-loathing or atonement on their part could ever erase the fact. The British, on the other hand, despite their Imperial past, were redeemed by virtue of having given the Beatles and association football to the world.
"Why did you want to see me, Juan?" Armstrong asked, taking out his packet of Faros and putting them on the table. His companion looked at the cheap brand with amused contempt. Nevertheless, this attitude did not stop him from smoking them.
"I want you to take a look at some *cuentos*," San Isidro replied, puffing away on the cigarette he'd taken. "Read them and make me an offer. They're in your line of work."
He delved into a shoulder bag lying underneath the table and took out a pile of papers, individuated into sections by rubber bands, and handed them over.

“I thought you didn’t write short stories,” Armstrong said.
“I didn’t write them. I’m acting as the exclusive agent. They’re in English, as you see, and they’re the type of horror stories you like. I handle all his stuff,” San Isidro replied.
“Who’s this author,” Armstrong said, looking at the top sheet. “Felipe López? I can’t say I’ve heard of him.”
“*El señor López* has only been writing for a couple of years. He’s my personal discovery, like you discovered me, no? *Es un autor auténtico*, not some hack. *Mira al cabellero* down there, the one who’s looking through the books? That’s *el señor López*. He doesn’t want to meet you until you’ve read his stuff. I told him I knew you, and that you weren’t the same as all those other *culeros* who’d rejected him.”
So that man in the crumpled grey suit was San Isidro’s first client, Armstrong thought. He hesitated for a moment but then relented. At least this man López had the appearance of being literate.
“Alright,” Armstrong said. “I’ll take them away with me and call you once I’ve read them. I can’t promise anything though.”
“Why not sit here and read them now, *compañero*? I tell you, these things are a goldmine. We can have a few more *chelas* while I wait for you to finish. He also does his own proofreading, so you won’t need to *trabajar mucho* yourself.”
“Short stories,” Armstrong riposted, “are fool’s gold, Juan. I told you, there’s no real money in them anymore. Have another on me if you like, but I’ve got to go. I’ll be in touch.”
With that closing remark Armstrong stood up, left a hundred pesos note on the table, and made his exit. He didn’t notice whether or not *el Señor López* saw him leave.

Ж

Over the next few days Armstrong almost forgot about the stories by Felipe López. He hated being asked to read fiction by an unknown author that had been praised by one of his friends. All too often he had to prick their enthusiasm, usually fired by beer and comradeship rather than from an objective assessment of literary merit. And San Isidro had never acted as an

agent for anybody before; he was far too consumed by his own literary ambitions. So it appeared obvious to Armstrong that San Isidro was paying back a favour of some sort. Though it seemed unlikely given the down-at-heel appearance of López, but perhaps it was a case of San Isidro owing him money.

Armstrong was staying close to Cuauhtémoc metro station in an apartment owned by Mexican friends of his, a couple, Enrique and María, who were in London for a few weeks, staying in his flat there in an exchange holiday. It was something they did every other year to save on hotel bills. There were only three days left before they were due to cross each other high over the Atlantic in flights going in the opposite direction. Enrique and María were both involved in publishing themselves, and he'd struck up a friendship with them in 1995 whilst attending a fantasy and horror convention held in San Francisco.

Since he was staying in an apartment belonging to friends, Armstrong paid little attention to the telephone, as he knew he'd just be taking messages for his absent hosts. Anything desperately important that needed to be passed on to them would be left on the answerphone machine. When he got around to checking it, there were three messages, two for Enrique and María, and one for him. It was left by Juan San Isidro:

"*Oye,¿qué onda?* Man, don't fuck me over. Have you read *los cuentos*? I think not. Otherwise you'd be chasing my ass like a *puto*. You don't leave Mexico until I hear from you, *¿te queda claro?*"

Despite his reluctance, Armstrong didn't see any alternative but to look the stories over. He took them out onto the little balcony overlooking the *privada* in which the apartment was situated. It was pleasantly warm outside in the evening, being October, and since the only traffic passing below consisted of pedestrians it was easy to concentrate. He sat down on the chair he'd moved out there, put the papers that he'd retrieved from his suitcase on his lap, and looked them over.

San Isidro had given him four stories, the longest of which was the third at around forty thousand words.

Armstrong had seen this type of story on dozens of occasions in the past, usually sent for his consideration by "fan authors" who were obsessed with the life and works of H.P. Lovecraft. Most of these pastiches contained long lists of clichéd forbidden books and names of unpronounceable entities to be incorporated into the so-called "Cthulhu Mythos". As he turned the

pages of the first of López's tales though, he was surprised to discover that they did not also contain the other feature associated with Lovecraft fan pastiches: there were no obvious grammatical, spelling or common textual errors. The work had already been gone over by an author with a keen eye for copyediting. Additionally, it had to be the case that Felipe López was fluent in English to the degree of being able to pass completely for a native. The text contained no trace of any Spanish language idioms indicating his Mexican nationality. Indeed, López even favoured the British spelling of certain words, rather than that used in the United States, in exactly the same fashion as Lovecraft had done himself.

Despite his disdain for pastiche, Armstrong kept reading. Eventually, to his surprise, he found that López's mimetic skills were so expert that he could almost believe that he was reading a previously undiscovered work written by Lovecraft himself. The story had the exact same sense of nightmarish authenticity as the best of the Providence author's tales. By the time he'd finished reading the first story, Armstrong was in a state of dazed wonder. Of course he realised, on a professional level, that the thing had no commercial potential. It smacked far too much of an in-joke, or a hoax, but it was nevertheless profoundly impressive in its own right. He began to wonder what this López person might be able to achieve were he to wean himself from the Lovecraft influence and produce fiction utilising a distinct authorial voice. It might result in another modern-day writer of the order of Thomas Ligotti.

Armstrong was dimly aware of the telephone ringing in the background. He ignored the sound, allowing the answer-machine to deal with whoever it was. He supposed that he could be San Isidro again and that it might have been better to pick up, but he was too eager to discover whether the story he'd just read was a fluke or not. Since the mosquitoes were now busy in the night air, he took the manuscripts inside and carried on reading.

Ж

Whoever had left the weird message on Enrique and María's answermachine was obviously some crank, thought Armstrong. He played it back again the morning after it was recorded.

There was a click on the line and the sound of unintelligible voices conferring amongst themselves and then a jarring, discordant muttering in English. The voice had a Mexican accent but was unknown to Armstrong. It said:

"*He belongs to us. His products belong to us. No-one will take him from us.*"

That was all.

After listening to the message one more time, Armstrong wondered if it were not simply San Isidro playing a joke on him, pretending to be another rival party involved with the works of Felipe López. Perhaps he thought the idea of some competition might spur Armstrong to a quick decision. If so, it was an unnecessary ploy.

After having read the second of López's tales he was convinced that the author had unmatched imagination and ability, despite being almost ruinously handicapped by his slavish mimicry of Lovecraft's style and themes. However, there was more than enough pure genius in there to convince Armstrong to take the matter further. If he could meet with López in person, he was determined to press upon him the necessity of a last revision of the texts: one that removed entirely the Cthulhu Mythos elements and replaced the florid, adjective-ridden prose with a minimalist approach.

When he telephoned Juan San Isidro it was no surprise that the poetturned-agent was deeply suspicious about Armstrong's insistence that he must meet López alone.

"You want to cut me out of the deal, *¡estás loco!*. Forget it, man. Now you know *que es un maestro, lo quieres todo para ti*."

"I only want to suggest a few changes to the texts, Juan. Nothing sinister in that, really. You'll get your commission, I'll not cheat you, believe me."

Their conversation went round in circles for ten minutes before Armstrong eventually convinced San Isidro that he had no underhand motive with regards to López's work. Even so, Armstrong realised that there was something more going on between the two of them than the usual protective relationship between an agent and his client. Nevertheless he successfully elicited a promise from San Isidro that he would ensure López met with him alone in the Café la Habana on La Calle de Bucareli at 2pm that same afternoon.

Ж

The Café la Habana was a haunt for distinguished old men who came to play chess, smoke their pipes or cigars and spend the better part of the afternoon dreaming over coffee or beer. It had a high ceiling and was decorated with framed photographs of Havana from the time before Castro's revolution. Many communist exiles from Batista Cuba came here, having fled persecution, and its fame dated from that period. The number of exiles had dwindled as the years passed, but it still had a reputation amongst all those who championed leftist defiance. The place had a long pedigree, having been a favourite meeting place, in even earlier decades, of those Spanish Republican refugees who'd settled in D.F. after escaping the wrath of General Franco's regime.

Armstrong sat in a corner, lingering over a glass of tequila with lime, when López walked in. He was half-an-hour late. His lean form was framed in the doorway by the brilliant sunshine outside. López cast his glance around the place before spotting Armstrong and making for the table at which he sat. López had changed his dark grey suit for a cream-coloured one, and this time he was wearing a matching panama hat. He gave a nod of recognition towards Armstrong as he approached.

Before he sat down he shook Armstrong's hand and apologised in English: "I hope that you will excuse my tardiness Mr. Armstrong, but the truth is that I was distracted by a particularly fascinating example of 18th Century colonial architecture whilst making my way over here."

Armstrong did not reply at once. He was taken aback by López's accent. Unless he was mistaken, it was pure, authentic New England Yankee. There was not a trace of Mexican in it.

"No need to apologise," Armstrong finally said. "Can I get you a drink; some beer or tequila perhaps?"

"Thank you but no. I never partake of alcoholic beverages, even for the purposes of refreshment. However, a cup of coffee, perhaps a double espresso, would be most welcome."

Armstrong ordered López's coffee and asked for another tequila with lime to be brought to their table.

"I liked your tales very much, it was quite an experience reading through them I can tell you. Of course they're overly derivative, but I imagine that

you easily could tone down all the Lovecraft elements …"
"I'm afraid, Mr. Armstrong," López said, with a chill tone entering his voice, "that alterations of any sort are completely out of the question. The stories must be printed as written, down to the last detail, otherwise this conversation is simply a waste of my time and your own."
The drinks arrived. López calmly began to shovel spoonful after spoonful of sugar into his cup, turning the coffee into treacly, caffeinerich syrup. Armstrong looked at him incredulously. Now he understood what was going on. San Isidro was definitely having a joke at his expense. He must have coached this López character, telling him all about H.P. Lovecraft's mannerisms and … to what end?
"Why are you persisting with this absurd Lovecraft impersonation?" Armstrong blurted out. "It's ridiculous. San Isidro put you up to it I suppose. But what I can't figure out is why, so let me in on the joke."
López looked up from his coffee and his eyes were deadly serious. And here it comes, boy and girls, thought Armstrong; here comes the line we've all been waiting for:

*This is no joke Mr. Armstrong, far from it, for I am in reality Howard Phillips Lovecraft of Providence, Rhode Island*.

"Surely the only rational answer has already suggested itself," López replied, very calmly and without any melodrama, "you are in fact sitting across the table from a certifiable lunatic."

Armstrong leaned back in his seat and very carefully considered the man opposite. His manner betrayed no sign of humour and he spoke as if what he'd suggested was an established truism.

"Then despite your behaviour, you know that you're not really

Lovecraft?" Armstrong said.
"Howard Phillips Lovecraft died in agony on the morning of Monday the 15th of March 1937 in Providence's Jane Brown Memorial Hospital. I cannot be him. However, since Tuesday the 15th of March 2003, I have been subject to a delusion whereby the identity of Lovecraft completely supplanted my own. I currently have no memories

whatsoever of having once been Felipe López of Mexico City. His family and friends are complete strangers to me. Meanwhile everyone Lovecraft knew is dead. I have become an outsider in this country and in this time. Unless one accepts the existence of the supernatural, which I emphatically do not, then only the explanation I have advanced has any credence."

Armstrong was taken aback by these remarks. This was like no madman he'd heard of: one who was not only able to recognise his derangement, but who also was totally a slave to it. It was more like some bizarre variant of a multiple personality disorder.

"What did the doctors here have to say?" Armstrong asked. "They did their best, but with no appreciable effect, let alone any amelioration, upon my malady. They tended to agree with my analysis of the situation," López said, after taking a sip of his coffee.

"What about López before this happened? Did he have any interest in Lovecraft prior to your – umm – alteration? I can't believe something like that would come out of nowhere."

It was annoying, but Armstrong found himself questioning López as if he were actually addressing Lovecraft inhabiting another body. "Quite so. I have discovered that López was a fanatical devotee of Lovecraft's life and work. Moreover, he was one of that rather contemptible breed of freaks who adhere to the outlandish belief that, rather than writing fiction, Lovecraft had unconscious access to ultramundane dimensions. The group to which he belonged, who styled themselves 'The Sodality of the Black Sun', advocated the piteous theory that Lovecraft was an occult prophet instead of a mere scribbler. This indicates to me a brain already on the brink of a potential collapse into total chaos. You see before you the inevitable consequence." There are a lot of sad crazies out there, thought Armstrong, who believe in nothing except the power of their own imaginations to create whatever they want to create from a supposedly malleable reality. A whole bunch of them had doubtless fastened upon Lovecraft's mythos for inspiration, but he doubted that any others had wound up like Felipe López.

"Well," Armstrong said, "I don't know what to make of all this. But surely one consideration has occurred to you already? If you really were Lovecraft, you'd know certain things that only he could possibly have

known.”
“An ingenious point,” said López, “but with all his contemporaries in the grave, how then to verify that information? Mr. Armstrong, I must remind you that the idea of Lovecraft’s consciousness not only surviving the death of his physical form, but also transferring itself to another body, is patently ridiculous. I make no such claim.”
López stared at him wordlessly and then, having finished the dregs of his coffee, got up and left.

Ж

When Armstrong arrived back at Enrique and María’s apartment, he found the door already ajar. Someone had broken in, forcing their entrance with a crowbar or similar tool judging by the splintered wound in the side of the door’s frame. He was relieved to find that the intruders had not torn the place apart and seemed to have scarcely disturbed anything. When he examined his own room however, he noted at once that the López manuscripts were missing. He unmistakably remembered having left them on his bedside table. However, in their place, was a note left behind by whoever had stolen them. It read:

*Do not meddle in our affairs again, lest the darkness seek you out.*

Obviously, this was a targeted burglary by the people who’d left that answerphone message warning him off having dealings with López. They must have wanted to get hold of the López stories extremely badly, and, whoever they were, must have also known that San Isidro had passed them to him, as well as knowing that Armstrong had an appointment with López, thus giving them the perfect moment to strike while he was out.

It was difficult to figure out what to do next. Everyone in Mexico City realises that to call the police regarding a burglary has two possible outcomes. The first is that they will turn up, treat it as a waste of their time and do nothing. The second is that things will turn surreal very quickly, because they will casually mention how poorly paid police officers are, and, in return for a “donation”, they are able to arrange for the swift return of

your goods with no questions asked. Given that the burglary was not the work of organised crime but some nutty underground cult, Armstrong thought better of involving the police.

Great, thought Armstrong, now I’m in trouble not only with the local branch of occult loonies, but with San Isidro and López for having lost the manuscripts. The first thing to do was give San Isidro the bad news. Since a matter of this delicate nature was best dealt with face-toface Armstrong decided to make his way over to the poet’s apartment, after he’d arranged for someone to come over and fix the door.

Ж

A cardinal, though unspoken, rule of travelling by metro in Mexico City is not to carry anything of value. If you’re a tourist, look like a tourist with little money. The security guards that hover around the ticket barriers are not there just for show. They carry guns for a reason. D.F. is the kidnapping capital of the world. Armstrong had always followed the dress-down rule and, although he stood out anyway because he was a pale-skinned *güerito*, he’d encountered no problems on his travels. The stations themselves were grimy, functionalist and depressing. Architecturally they resembled prison camps, but located underground. Nevertheless Armstrong enjoyed travelling by metro; it was unbelievably cheap, the gap between trains was less than a minute, and it was like being on a mobile market place. Passengers selling homemade CDs would wander up and down the carriages, with samples of music playing on ghetto blasters slung over their shoulders. Others sold tonics for afflictions from back pain to impotence. Whether these worked or not there was certainly a market for them, as the sellers did a brisk trade.

One of the carriages on the train that Armstrong took must have been defective. All its lights were out and, curiously, he noticed that when anyone thought to board it anyway changed their minds at once and preferred to either remain on the platform or else rush over into one of the adjacent carriages instead.

Armstrong alighted at Chapultepec station, found his way through the convoluted tunnels up to the surface and turned left alongside the eight-lane road outside. The noise of the traffic blocked out most other sounds, and the vehicle fumes were like a low-level grey nebula held down by the force of the brilliant afternoon sunshine. People scurried to and fro along the pavement, their gazes fixed straight ahead, particularly those of any lone women for whom eye-contact with a *chilango* carried the risk of inviting a lewd suggestion.

A long footbridge flanked the motorway, and was the only means of crossing for pedestrians for a couple of miles or so. At night it was a notorious crime spot and only the foolhardy would cross it unaccompanied. However, at this time of the day everyone safely used it and a constant stream of people went back and forth.

Juan San Isidro's apartment was only five minutes walk from the bridge, and was housed in a decaying brownstone building just on the fringes of La Condesa. Sometimes Armstrong wondered whether the poet was the structure's only occupant, for the windows of all the other apartments were either blackened by soot or else broken and hanging open day and night to the elements.

He pushed the intercom button for San Isidro, and, after a minute, heard a half-awake voice say:
"*¿Quién es?*"
"It's me, Victor, come down and let me in, will you?" Armstrong replied, holding his mouth close to the intercom.
"Stand in front where I can see you," he said, "and I'll give you *mis llaves*."
Armstrong left the porch, went onto the pavement and looked up. San Isidro leant out of one of the third floor windows, his lank black hair making a cowl over his face. He tossed a plastic bag containing the keys over the ledge, and Armstrong retrieved it after it hit the ground.
The building had got even worse since the last time he'd paid a visit. If it was run-down before, now it was positively unfit for human habitation and should have been condemned. The lobby was filled with debris, half the tiles had fallen from the walls and a dripping waterpipe was poking out from a huge hole in the ceiling. Vermin scurried around back in the

shadows. The building's staircase was practically a deathtrap, for if a step had not already collapsed, those that remained seemed likely to do so in the near future. As Armstrong climbed he clutched at the shaky banister with both hands, his knuckles white with the fierce grip, advancing up sideways like a crab.

San Isidro was standing in the doorway to his apartment, smoking a fat joint with one hand and swigging from a half-bottle of Cuervo with the other. The smell of marijuana greeted Armstrong as he finally made it to the fourth floor. Being continually stoned, he thought, was about the only way to make the surroundings bearable.

"*Hola compañero,* good to see you, come on inside."

His half-glazed eyes, wide fixed smile and unsteady gait indicated that he'd been going at the weed and tequila already for most of the day.

"This is a celebration, no? You've come to bring me *mucho dinero*, I hope. I'm honoured that you come here to see me. *Siéntate, por favor*."

San Isidro cleared a space on the sofa that was littered with porno magazines and empty packets of Delicados cigarettes. Armstrong then sat down while San Isidro picked up an empty glass from the floor, poured some tequila in it and put it in his hand.

"*Salud,*" he said "to our friend and saviour Felipe López, *el mejor escritor de cuentos macabros del mundo, ahora y siempre*."

"I want you to tell me, Juan, as a friend and in confidence, what happened to López and how he came to think and act exactly like H.P. Lovecraft. And I want to know about the people that are after him. Were they people he knew before his – um – breakdown?" Armstrong said, looking at the glass and trying to find a clean part of the rim from which to drink. At this stage he was reluctant to reveal that the López manuscripts had been stolen. San Isidro was volatile, and Armstrong wasn't sure how he might react to the news.

San Isidro appeared to start momentarily at the mention of "H.P. Lovecraft" but whether it was the effect of the name or the cumulative effect of the booze and weed, it was difficult to tell.

"So he told you, eh? Well, not all of it. *No recuerda nada de antes,* when he was just Felipe López. *No importa qué pasó antes*, sure, there was some heavy shit back then. *Si quieres los cuentos, primero quiero mucho dinero.* Then maybe I'll tell you about it, eh?"

"I'll pay you Juan, and pay you well. But I need to understand the truth."

Armstrong replied.
What San Isidro told Armstrong over the next half-hour consisted of a meandering monologue, mostly in Spanish, of a brilliant young *gringo* who had come to Mexico in the 1940s to study Mesoamerican anthropology. This man, Robert Hayward Barlow, had been Lovecraft's literary executor. Armstrong had heard the name before but what little he knew did not prepare him for San Isidro's increasingly bizarre account of events.
He began plausibly enough. Barlow, he said, had taken possession of Lovecraft's papers after his death in 1937. He had gone through them thereafter and donated the bulk to the John Hay Library in Providence, in order to establish a permanent archival resource. However he was ostracised by the Lovecraft circle, a campaign driven by Donald Wandrei and August Derleth, on the basis that he had supposedly stolen the materials in the first place from under the nose of the Providence author's surviving aunt.
However, what was not known then, San Isidro claimed, was that Barlow had kept some items back, the most important of which was the "Dream-Diary of the Arkham Cycle", a notebook in longhand of approximately thirty or so pages and akin to Lovecraft's commonplace book. It contained, so San Isidro claimed, dozens of entries from 1923 to 1936 that appeared to contradict the assertion that Lovecraft's mythos was solely a fictional construct. These entries are not suggestive by and of themselves *at the time they were supposedly written*, for the content was confined to the description of dreams in which elements from his myth-cycle had manifested themselves. These could be accepted as having no basis in reality had it not been for their supposedly *prophetic* nature. One such entry San Isidro quoted from memory. By this stage his voice was thick and the marijuana he'd been smoking made him giggle in a disquieting, paranoid fashion:

*A dream of the bony fingers of Azathoth reaching down to touch two cities in Imperial Japan, and laying them waste. Mushroom clouds portending the arrival of the Fungi from Yuggoth.*

To Armstrong, this drivel seemed only a poor attempt to turn Lovecraft into some latter-day Nostradamus, but San Isidro clearly thought otherwise. Armstrong wondered what López had to do with all of this, and whether he

would repudiate the so-called “prophecies” by sharing Lovecraft’s trust in indefatigable rationalism. That would be ironic.

“How does all this tie in with López?” Armstrong said. “In 1948,” San Isidro slurred, “there were *unos brujos, se llamaban La Sociedad del Sol Oscuro*, cheap *gringo* paperbacks of Lovecraft were their inspiration. They were interested in revival of worship for the old Aztec gods before they incorporated Cthulhu mythology. The gods of the two are much alike, no? *Sangre, muerte y la onda cósmica.* They tormented Barlow, suspected that’s why he came to Mexico, because of the connection. Barlow was a *puto*, he loved to give it to boys, and soon they found out about the dream-diary. That was the end. Blackmail. He killed himself in 1951, took a whole bottle of seconal.”
“But what about López?”
“They had to wait *cincuenta años para que se alinearan las estrellas*. Blood sacrifices, so much blood, the police paid off over decades. But it was prophesised in his own dream-diary: *El espléndido regreso*. Even the exact date was written in there. López was the chosen vessel.”
“How do you know all this, Juan?”
“I chose him from amongst us, but I betrayed them, the secret was passed down to me, and now I need to get out of this *pinche* country *rápido*, before *mis hermanos* come for me. López, he wants to go back to Providence, one last time,” San Isidro giggled again at this point, “though I reckon it’s changed a lot, since he last saw it, eh? But, me, I don’t care.”
He’s as insane as López, Armstrong thought. This is just an elaborate scheme cooked up by the two of them to get money out of someone they think of as simply another stupid, rich foreigner. After all, what evidence was there that any of this nonsense had a grain of truth in it? Like most occultists, they’d cobbled together a mass of pseudo-facts and assertions and dressed it up as secret knowledge known only to the “initiated”. Christ, he wouldn’t have been surprised if, at this point, San Isidro produced a “Dream Diary of the Arkham Cycle”, some artificiallyaged notebook written in the 1960s by a drugged-up kook who’d forged Lovecraft’s handwriting and stuffed it full of allusions to events after his death in 1937. They’d managed to pull off a pretty fair imitation of his stories between themselves and whoever else was involved in the scam. The results were certainly no worse than August Derleth’s galling attempts at “posthumous

collaboration" with Lovecraft.
At last, as if San Isidro had reached a stage where he had drunk and smoked himself back to relative sobriety, he lurched up from the easy chair in which he'd been sitting. He ran his fingers through his beard, stared hard at Armstrong and said:
"We need to talk business, how much are you going to give me?"
"I'll give you enough to get out of Mexico, for the sake of our friendship, but I can't pay for the stories, Juan, anyway someone has stolen them." Armstrong replied.
Probably you or López, he thought cynically.
The only reaction from San Isidro was that he raised his eyebrows a fraction. Without saying a word he went into the kitchen next door and Armstrong could hear him rattling around in some drawers.
"If you're going to try to fleece me," Armstrong said, raising his voice so that he could be heard in the adjacent room, "then you and López will have to do better than all this Barlow and the 'Sodality of the Black Sun' crap."
When San Isidro came back into the room, his teeth were bared like those of a hungry wolf. In his right hand he was clutching a small calibre pistol, which he raised and aimed directly at Armstrong's head.
"*Cabrón, hijo de puta, di tus últimas oraciones, porque te voy a matar.*"
Sweat broke out on Armstrong's forehead. His thoughts raced. Was the gun loaded or was this only bravado? Another means of extorting money from him? Could he take the chance?
Just as Armstrong was about to cry out, everything went black. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the afternoon, with brilliant sunshine outside, the room was immediately swallowed up by total darkness. Armstrong could not believe what was happening. He thought, at first, that he had gone blind. Only when he stumbled around in the inky void and came right up against the window did he see the sunlight still outside, but not penetrating at all beyond the glass and into the room. Outside, the world went on as normal. He began to scream—
"Juan! Juan!"
Armstrong bumped into the sofa in a panic, before he finally located the exit. From behind him came the sound of six shots, fired one after the other, deafeningly loud, and then nothing but a hideous, gaunt silence more terrible than any sound. He staggered into the hallway, and into the light, turned back once to look at the impenetrable darkness behind him, and then

hurtled down the stairs. He now gave no thought, as he had done when coming up, as to how precarious they were. He did, however, even in the grip of terror, recall that the building was deserted and that no one could swear to his having been there.

Ж

After what had happened to him, Armstrong expected to feel a sense of catastrophic psychological disorientation. Whatever had attacked San Isidro, he thought, carrying darkness along with it so as to hide its deeds, was proof of something, even if it did not prove that everything San Isidro had claimed was in fact true. At the very least it meant that the “Sodality of the Black Sun” had somehow called a psychic force into existence through their half-century of meddling with rituals and sacrifices. Armstrong had no choice but to discount the alternative rational explanation. At the time when day had become night in San Isidro’s apartment he had been afraid, but nothing more, otherwise he was clear-headed and not prone to any type of hysterical interlude or hallucinatory fugue. Rather than feeling that his worldview had been turned upside-down however, he instead felt a sense of profound loneliness. What had happened had really happened but he knew that if he tried to tell anyone about it, they would scoff or worse, pity him, as he himself would have done, were he in their position.
Enrique and María returned to their apartment on schedule and Armstrong told them of his intention to remain in Mexico City a while longer. They noticed the curious melancholy in him, but did not question him about it in any detail. Nor would he have told them, even if prompted. Armstrong moved out the next day, transferring his meagre belongings to a room in a seedy hotel overlooking La Calle de Bucareli. From there he was able to gaze out of a fifth-floor window in his *cuartito* and keep watch on the Café la Habana opposite. His remaining connection to the affair was with Felipe López, the man who had the mind of Lovecraft, and he could not leave without seeing him one last time. He had no idea whether San Isidro were alive or dead. What was certain was that it was inconceivable that he attempted to make contact with him. Were San Isidro dead, it would arouse suspicion that Armstrong had been connected with his demise, and were he

alive, then Armstrong had little doubt that he'd want to exact revenge.
Days passed, and Armstrong's vigil yielded no results. There was no sign of López and he had no way of contacting him directly, no phone number, and no address. He was fearful that the Mexican police might call upon him at any instant, and scanned the newspapers daily in order to see if there were any reports mentioning San Isidro. He found nothing at all relating to him and recalled what he'd been told about the authorities having been paid off with blood money over decades. When Armstrong left his room it was only to visit the local Oxxo convenience store in order to stock up on *tortas de jamón y queso, Faros, y tequila barato.* The last of these items was most important to him. He spent most of the time pouring the tequila into a tumbler and knocking it back, while sitting at his pigeon-shit stained window, hoping to see López finally enter the Café la Habana in search of him. All he saw was the endless mass of frenzied traffic, drivers going from nowhere to anywhere and back in a hurry, oblivious to the revelation that separated him from such commonplace concerns, and which had taken him out of the predictable track of everyday existence.
And then, twelve days after he'd rented the room in the hotel, he finally saw a slightly stooped figure in a grey suit making his way towards the Café la Habana. It was López, there could be no doubt about it.

Ж

López was seated in a table in the corner of the Café, reading a paperback book and sipping at a cup of coffee. As Armstrong approached he saw that the book was a grubby second-hand copy of *Los Mitos de Cthulhu por H.P. Lovecraft y Otros.* The edition had a strange green photographic cover, depicting, it appeared, a close-up of a fossil. López immediately put down the volume once he caught sight of Armstrong.
"San Isidro seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth," he said. "I've been endeavouring to contact him for the last two weeks, but all to no avail. I admit to feeling not a little concern in the matter. Have you crossed paths with him of late?"
Armstrong could not take his eyes off the man. Could "The Sodality of the Black Sun" have succeeded? Was the creature that conversed with him now

actually the mind of Lovecraft housed in the body of some Mexican occultist called López? God, what a disappointment it must have been for them, he thought. What irony! To go to all that trouble to reincarnate the consciousness of the great H.P. Lovecraft, only to find that after his return he denied his own posthumous existence! But why keep such a survival alive, why allow the existence of the last word on the subject if it contradicted their aims? It made no sense.
“I’m afraid,” said Armstrong, “that San Isidro has vanished.”
“I don’t see ...” said López.
“Not all of Lovecraft came back did it? I don’t think they salvaged the essence, only a fragment. A thing with his memories, but not the actual man himself. Some sort of failed experiment. You’re the one who’s been leaving me those warning notes, aren’t you?” Armstrong said, interrupting.
“You presume too much, Mr. Armstrong, and forget,” replied López, “that I have not, at any stage, asserted that I believe myself to be anything other than the misguided individual called Felipe López.”
“That’s just part of the deception!” Armstrong said, getting to his feet and jabbing his finger at López, “that’s what you *know* Lovecraft would have said himself!”
“How on earth could I be of benefit to the designs of an occult organisation such as ‘The Sodality of the Black Sun’ if I deny the very existence of supernatural phenomena? You make no sense, Sir.”
López’s lips had narrowed to a thin cruel line upon his face and he was pale with indignation. His voice had dropped to a threatening whisper.
Everyone in the Café la Habana had turned around to stare, stopped dreaming over their pipes, newspapers and games of chess, and paused, their attention drawn by the confrontation being played out in English before them.
“The Old Ones are only now being born, emerging from your fiction into our world,” Armstrong said, “the black magicians of ‘The Sodality of the Black Sun’ want to literally become them. Once they do, the Old Ones will finally exist, independent of their creator, with the power to turn back time, recreating history to their own design as they go along.”
“You, Sir,” said López, “are clearly more deranged than am I.”
“Tell me about the notebook, Lovecraft, tell me about your ‘DreamDiary of the Arkham Cycle’,” Armstrong shouted.
“There is no record of such a thing,” López replied, “there are no

indications that such an item ever existed amongst Lovecraft’s papers, no mention of anything like it in his letters or other writings, no evidence for …”

“Tell me whether history is already beginning to change, whether the first of the Old Ones has begun manipulating the events of the past?”

“As Armstrong finished asking his question he saw a shocking change come over López’s features. Two forces seemed to war within the Mexican’s body and a flash of pain distorted his face. At that moment the whites of his eyes vanished, as if the darkness of night looked out through them. But then he blinked heavily, shook his head from side to side, and finally regained his composure. As he did so, his usual aspect returned. The change and its reversal had been so sudden that, despite how vivid it had been, Armstrong could have just imagined it. After all, his nerves were already shredded, and he jumped at shadows.

“I can tell you nothing. What you are suggesting is madness,” López said, getting to his feet and picking up the copy of the book he’d left on the table. He left without looking back.

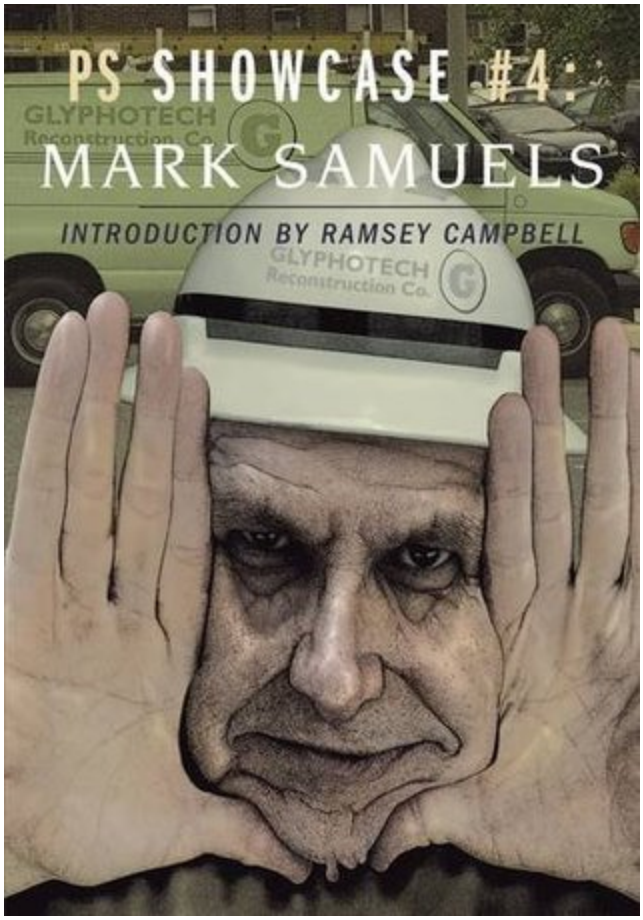
Ж

Armstrong did not return to London. He acquired a certain notoriety over the years as the irredeemably drunk English bum who could be found hanging around in the Café la Habana, talking to anyone who would listen to his broken Spanish. However, he was never to be found there after nightfall or during an overcast and dark afternoon. At chess, he insisted on playing white, and could not bear to handle the black pieces, asking his opponent to remove them from the board on his behalf.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Samuels (born 1967) is the author of five short story collections; *The White Hands and Other Weird Tales* (Tartarus Press 2003), *Black Altars* (Rainfall Books 2003), *Glyphotech & Other Macabre Processes* (PS Publishing 2008), *The Man who Collected Machen & Other Stories*

(Chomu Press 2011) and *Written In Darkness* (Egaeus Press 2014) as well as the author of the novel *The Face of Twilight* (PS Publishing 2006). His tales have appeared in many prestigious anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic including *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Weird*, and *A Mountain Walks*. Forthcoming books by him include the novel *A Pilgrim Stranger* and a new collection of stories *The Revelations of Doctor Prozess.*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